

Aging in experimental places: A case study on seasonal street transformations with older adults in Verdun, Montréal

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ABSTRACT

Pedestrian infrastructure is increasingly recognized as an essential priority in developing safe and health-promoting transport systems. In addition to sidewalk and crosswalk improvements, many cities are experimenting with fully pedestrianized streets with the aim of fostering liveable and inclusive neighbourhoods. While the broad societal benefits of pedestrianized streets have been well documented, greater research is needed on older adults' experiences and perceptions of these initiatives. Drawing from case study methodology, this paper traces the rise of car-free streets across the city of Montréal and examines the tensions and opportunities that arise for an aging population in this process. Through in-depth interviews with older adults and content analysis of urban policies, we explore the role of street transformations in supporting older adults' ability to age in place. The movement to permanently pedestrianize Wellington Street, a seasonal pedestrianization initiative in the neighbourhood of Verdun, Montréal, is provided as a case study to shed light on the possibilities and limits of street experiments in provoking age-inclusive transitions to sustainability. Policy analysis highlights the city's commitment to pedestrianization, universal access, and age-friendly environments, while revealing important gaps in the spatial and seasonal scope of these interventions and in the monitoring of their outcomes. Interview findings further demonstrate how older adults' lived experiences of street transformations are shaped by their perceptions of social inclusion, seasonal constraints, accessibility challenges, and civic engagement. Taken together, the findings from this study can help to inform policymakers and practitioners aiming to accommodate the diverse needs and aspirations of older adults in the design of car-free streets and wider sustainability initiatives.

1. Introduction

Pedestrian street experiments are gaining momentum as cities aim to create more liveable and convivial urban neighbourhoods (Bertolini, 2020; VanHoose, 2023). These experiments are seen as offering a low risk opportunity to explore temporary changes to street regulations and designs as potential pathways towards more radical transitions to sustainability (Glaser & Krizek, 2021; VanHoose et al., 2022). While experimentation is frequently promoted as a transformative urban planning tool, scholars have called for greater reflection on the ability of these interventions to spur long-term changes to the urban status quo (Bertolini, 2020) and their impacts on diverse social groups (Verlinghieri et al., 2023; Villani & Talamini, 2021). Beyond their limited geographic edges, street experiments can provide a window into multi-layered conflicts and constellations of power (Vitale Brovarone

et al., 2023), raising questions on the social implications of experimental urban milieux.

Building on calls for situated and socially engaged research on sustainable transitions (Avelino et al., 2024; Bouzarovski, 2022; Klaever & Verlinghieri, 2025; Rodrigue et al., 2023; Schwanen, 2021; Sheller, 2021), this paper uses a case study approach to examine the planning and implementation of pedestrian streets across the city of Montréal, exploring the barriers and opportunities that arise for an aging population in this process. We conceptualize pedestrian street initiatives as components of the mobility systems shaping older adults' daily travel, recognizing how accessibility, network integration, and opportunities for active travel influence mobility outcomes and the age-friendliness of urban transitions (Cheng et al., 2023; Van Cauwenberg et al., 2012). Considering the complex mobility needs of an aging population (James et al., 2025; Nordbakke & Schwanen, 2014; Ravensbergen et al., 2022),

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a focus on older adults is warranted to better account for their unique experiences and perspectives, which are frequently overlooked in urban research and planning practices (Cuignet et al., 2020). Given the City of Montréal's growing indication of *age-inclusivity* and *universal accessibility* objectives in urban policies (Ville de Montréal, 2011, 2023b), an assessment of how these goals are being outlined and integrated into street experiment initiatives also merits careful attention. Contributing to recent theorizing on sustainable transitions (Avelino et al., 2024; Cavoli, 2021; Hartl et al., 2024), this paper asks: what possibilities and limitations emerge at the intersection of street transformations and the goal of fostering age-inclusive transitions to sustainability? Through in-depth interviews with older adults and content analysis of urban policies, we provide an exploratory analysis of the relationship between street transformations and the process of aging in place.

2. Bridging the literature on urban experiments and aging in place

Scholars have defined street experiments in terms of intentional changes to street designs, infrastructure, policies, uses, and/or forms that are based on a people-centred, learning-by-doing approach (Bertolini, 2020; Smeds & Papa, 2023). These experiments are often used as transitional tools for testing the potential for longer-term transformations, evaluating their success in a relatively controlled manner (Luederitz et al., 2017), and justifying more comprehensive measures to promote active transport to policymakers (Marcheschi et al., 2022). Researchers have identified the provisional benefits of street experiments, including improvements in physical activity levels, increased revenue for local businesses, as well as enhanced perceptions of public safety (Marcheschi et al., 2022; Smeds & Papa, 2023).

Much of the theorizing on urban experiments has focused on their global transformative potential. Scholars have questioned the tendency to view street experiments as 'one-off' events, calling for a deeper assessment of the reasons for their suppression, marginalization, assimilation and/or transformation (Savini & Bertolini, 2019). Bertolini (2020) introduced the concept of *transition experiment* to orient future research towards an assessment of these initiatives in terms of their ability to incite largescale transitions to sustainability. Building on this framework, several scholars have conducted multi-sited analyses of street experiments, assessing different factors that hinder or facilitate their transitional capacity (Sierhuis et al., 2024; VanHoose & Bertolini, 2023), as well as the implications of these experiments for harmonious urban futures (T. H. Chan, 2024; Glaser & Krizek, 2021).

Notwithstanding their transformative promise, researchers are calling for more contextualized qualitative research on street experiments (Marcheschi et al., 2022). In their systematic review of 170 publications, Sengers and colleagues (2019) reveal that while experimentation has been central to the sustainability field, nuanced qualitative studies on the micro-political dimensions of street experiments remain limited. An emergent body of qualitative research sheds light on residents' perspectives of street experiments to uncover factors contributing to the social acceptability of experimentation and/or the unintended fallout of these initiatives in terms of social inequities (Verlinghieri et al., 2023; Vitale Brovarone et al., 2023). While scholars have explored the implications of street experiments on questions of gender (Beyazit et al., 2023), racial inequities (Slabaugh et al., 2022), migrant rights (Villani & Talamini, 2021), and socio-economic inequalities (Verlinghieri et al., 2023), engagement with the perspectives of older adults remains limited in this literature. Quantitative studies have revealed mixed results regarding the opinions of older adults towards pedestrian experiments across different global contexts (Amistad, 2010; Castillo-Manzano et al., 2014; Nello-Deakin et al., 2024; Te Boveldt et al., 2023), pointing to a need for contextualized qualitative research to explore divergent experiences and perspectives.

Here we bring research on street experimentation into conversation with the literature on aging in place. While people above the age of 65

are the most rapidly growing segment of the North American population, studies demonstrate that urban-planning processes are largely age unfriendly (Cuignet et al., 2020; Loukaitou-Sideris et al., 2019). Transport researchers have studied how the aging process influences travel patterns, which can lead to social isolation as the average distance and number of daily trips tends to decline with age (Cao et al., 2010). The concept of *aging in place*—defined as an integrated policy approach focused on supporting older people's ability to remain in their own homes and neighbourhoods for as long as desired and possible—emphasizes the need to cultivate streetscapes that support the different needs and interests of an aging population (Lewis & Buffel, 2020).

From a sociological perspective, old age is characterized by a changing sense of identity in relation to individual aging processes and sometimes contrasting social expectations and institutional discourses of aging (Höppner & Urban, 2018), which have historically framed aging primarily in terms of dependency and care needs. Insofar as individuals share these experiences in some way, the term "older adults" remains relevant, although it is crucial to acknowledge questions of social and personal difference (Lavenir, 2022). From this perspective, dominant understanding about "successful aging" merit critical analysis for their implicit ageism and ableism, wherein usual aging processes and disabilities are framed as problematic or undesirable (Martinson & Berridge, 2015). This perspective draws attention to the intersections ageism, disablism, and other axes of social oppression, such as those rooted in heterosexism, racism, cisgender bias, and classism (Jason et al., 2023; Sins Invalid, 2017). This includes acknowledging the ways that urban planning interventions, while often offering positive benefits for aging communities, could also unintentionally reinforce or introduce new intersectional inequalities, including the possible entrenchment of urban segregation patterns, rising costs of living, gentrification-induced displacement, among other accessibility concerns that disproportionately impact low-income and disabled older adults (Bohorquez et al., 2024; Phillipson & Grenier, 2021; Villar-Abejón et al., 2025; Weil et al., 2024).

We build on these sociological understandings to move beyond ideas about aging as a 'problem' and to inform an intersectional and equity-oriented analysis of street transformations. This process involves cultivating a careful understanding of older adulthood that appreciates the heterogeneity and agency of the aging population (Finlay et al., 2023; Höppner & Urban, 2018; Martinson & Berridge, 2015) as well as the inclusion of qualitative perspectives to elicit *epistemic engagement* with diverse embodied experiences and forms of knowledge (Castañeda et al., 2024; Klaever & Verlinghieri, 2025; Sheller, 2018). This further includes engaging with subjective understandings of wellbeing in relation to the process of aging in place, including individuals' emotions, socio-material conditions, and levels of satisfaction with different aspects of their neighbourhoods (understood as *hedonic wellbeing*) as well as their capacity to fulfill a higher sense of purpose or meaning in life (understood as *eudaimonic wellbeing*) (Mokhtarian, 2019; Nordbakke & Schwanen, 2014). Through this approach, we emphasize the value of older adults' expertise in the analysis and design of street experiments, offering cities the opportunity to create more age-friendly streetscapes, address particular affordability and accessibility challenges, and support the agency of aging individuals.

3. Case study context

The broad study area for this research is the Island of Montréal, Canada, which has a metropolitan population of over four million residents. Montréal has a large aging population, with people above the age of 65 comprising 16.8 % of the population as of 2021 (Statistics Canada, 2021). Roughly 16 % of the population in Montréal and the surrounding area has a disability (ibid.)—a statistic that is expected to increase considering that the disability rate is higher among older adults. In addition to proposing new age-inclusive strategies (Ville de Montréal,

2023b), the City of Montréal has been formulating intensive policies to foster sustainable travel behaviour (Rodrigue et al., 2023; Soliz, Rodrigue, et al., 2023). Since 2017, the city has placed a particular emphasis on inclusive walking environments, (Brodeur-Ouimet et al., 2023), actively encouraging the pedestrianization of streets as a means to return public space to pedestrians while promoting placemaking (Ville de Montréal, 2017). By the time this research was conducted, 34 pedestrian or shared streets had been initiated across the city, most of them available on a temporary basis during the summer months (Fig. 1).

However, characterized by cold winters with heavy snowfall and icy conditions, Montréal presents a challenging context for the implementation of year-round pedestrianization. While Montréal's summers are warm and humid, the winter season typically lasts approximately five months (from November to early April), with a mean January temperature of -9.2°C , an average annual snowfall of 216.6 cm, and approximately 58 snowy days per year. In this context, the success of permanent pedestrianization depends on the capacity to manage severe winter conditions, including the additional maintenance demands and financial costs associated with snow removal, de-icing, and ensuring accessibility.

We chose to focus our analysis on Wellington Street, a seasonal pedestrian street in Montréal's Verdun neighbourhood (Fig. 1), given its emergence as a major matter of public concern. Although Wellington Street traverses several neighbourhoods, this study focuses on the 1.3 km section in Verdun that has been pedestrianized on a temporary/seasonal basis since 2021 and was slated for a major public consultation on the possibility of permanent pedestrianization following a citizen-led advocacy movement in 2023. This portion is a mainly commercial artery featuring a variety of shops, restaurants, cafes, health services, food banks, and a metro (subway) station. When pedestrianized during the summer, several bus routes that operate on Wellington Street are rerouted to nearby parallel streets.

Verdun is a historically working-class neighbourhood, comprising mainly middle and low-income residents (Jetté et al., 2010). Residents above the age of 65 account for 17.7 % of the neighbourhood's population (Statistics Canada, 2021). This context offers a useful case for exploring tensions and opportunities in the implementation of street experiments considering that notable demographic and built-environment changes have taken shape across the neighbourhood over the past two decades (Kiani et al., 2023) and TimeOut's (2022) naming of "Promenade Wellington" as "the world's coolest street."

Moreover, the emergence of significant civil-society challenges, particularly a local social movement in Verdun working to challenge the city's seasonal approach to implementing pedestrian streets, offers an important site for unravelling the social implications of street transformations. The significant levels of disagreement that arose across the neighbourhood on the possibility of permanent, year-round pedestrianization of Wellington Street (Ducas, 2024) further call for careful assessment from the perspective of older adults.

4. Methodology

This paper builds on case study methodology to examine pedestrian street experiments through a sociological perspective on aging. Case study methodology is a qualitative research approach encompassing the analysis of a localized system through multiple information sources (Creswell & Poth, 2016). Single case studies are well suited for examining previously neglected and undertheorized issues (Ingram et al., 2020), offering insights for exploratory analysis on the relationship between street experiments and aging in place.

We first conducted a review of relevant policy and public-consultation documents relating to the development of pedestrian streets and related strategies across the Greater Montréal Area. Given the focus of our study on pedestrian streets and aging in place, we included only local policies which focus specifically on pedestrianization and/or pedestrian rights as well as those pertaining to the inclusion of older adults and people with disabilities. In total, 24 policy documents were analyzed, spanning from the 2005 Montréal Charter of Rights and Responsibilities to the 2023 Municipal Strategy for Older Adults.

Following related methodologies (Soliz, Carvalho, et al., 2023; Vogel & Henstra, 2015), we centred our assessment on policy goals and content, including the extent to which pro-pedestrian policy documents engage with the topics of aging and universal accessibility. This approach allows for an assessment of the integration (or lack thereof) between pedestrianization and age-inclusive governance strategies, as well as providing a basis for assessing pedestrian policies based on feedback from the local older-adult community.

Our decision to conduct in-depth, semi-structured interviews for this study was based on the need for qualitative research on street experiments from the perspectives of older adults. We employed multiple techniques for recruiting research participants over the age of 65 from the target area, beginning with recruitment from a previous survey

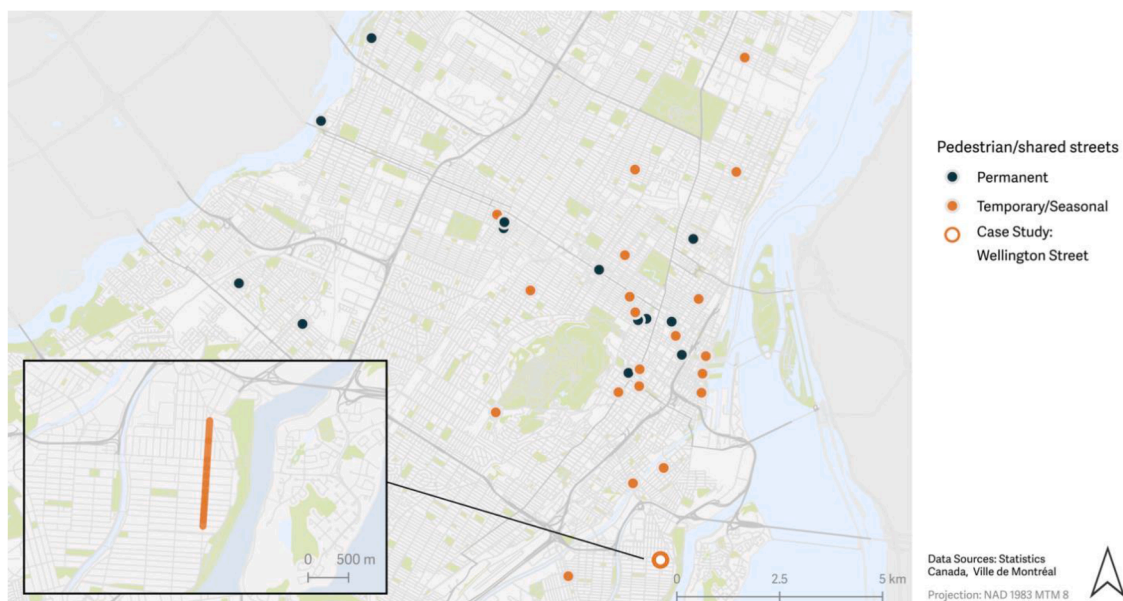


Fig. 1. Pedestrian streets across the city of Montréal. Source: Authors.

conducted by our research group with older adults who agreed to be contacted for a follow-up interviews (Alousi-Jones et al., 2025). We took a stratified purposeful approach to selecting research participants with the aim of ensuring a representative sample from different older adult demographic groups (sample characteristics listed in Table 1). Considering Hennink and Kaiser's (2022) systematic review findings showing that data saturation can be reached with relatively small sample sizes for studies with a targeted focus, we initially generated a sample of eight older adults given the focus of our study on a specific neighbourhood and demographic (Hennink & Kaiser, 2022). While we found that saturation was reached within the initial eight interviews, we opted to recruit an additional two interviewees through snowball sampling to include older adults from less-represented areas of the neighbourhood.

We took a *phenomenological approach* to conducting interviews, a method focused on understanding diverse lived experiences associated with given phenomenon (Patton, 2014). We also integrated techniques from *epistemic interviewing*, which aims to move interviews beyond surface-level experiences and opinions to provide space for interviewees to engage dialectically in examining of a given issues and participate in the production of new knowledge (Brinkmann, 2007). Using a semi-structured interview guide, the interviews covered a variety of open-ended questions regarding participants' experiences, emotions, perspectives, and aspirations in relation to local pedestrian infrastructure and planning processes, while also incorporating discussion on public-consultation processes as well as other unexpected themes of relevance to the interviewees' daily lives. The 10 in-depth interviews were conducted in November and December 2023, several months after the citizen-led petition advocating for the permanent pedestrianization of Wellington Street was submitted. The interviews lasted anywhere between one-two hours and were conducted in French or English, with French interviews being translated to English by the research team.

Our approach to data analysis draws from Braun and Clarke's (2019) iterative and reflexive framework for qualitative thematic analysis. Data familiarization was completed by two researchers who carefully examined the data and generated a list of codes using Taguette software. While the research team mainly held an 'outsider' perspective in relation to the research topic (with all team members' ages falling under 65 and without any direct participation in the activist movement to pedestrianize Wellington St.), one of the researchers resided in the Verdun neighbourhood and attended related public-consultation sessions in an observational capacity. Recognizing that positionality is always part of qualitative research (Braun & Clarke, 2019), reflexivity journals were

used as a means of tracking evolving analytical thoughts, interrogating particular assumptions, and establishing an audit trail (Nowell et al., 2017). We also integrated peer debriefing meetings with the research team to mitigate potential biases and support the inclusion of diverse perspectives in the analytical process, working to ensure that analytical decisions aligned with both the study's theoretical orientation and participant experiences. Through this iterative process, the researchers searched for themes by unifying the coded data extracts into relevant groups involving patterns of shared meaning. Following a thematic analysis approach that is both inductive and deductive (Braun & Clarke, 2019), we worked to review themes based on significant patterns found in the raw data as well as relating to relevant social perspectives on aging. Whenever possible, we incorporated direct interview quotes within the research manuscript (chosen as representative excerpts) to reveal the prevalence of themes and to allow older adults space to speak to urban issues on their own terms.

5. Policy findings

Montréal's pedestrian streets are situated within an urban-policy context striving to recognize "the primacy of pedestrians in urban space" (2008: 22). Montreal's *Charte du piéton* (Pedestrian Charter), sets forth a vision to "encourage walking as the preferred mode of transport..." (Ville de Montréal, 2006: 2). The city has since expanded this vision, including the 2008 *Plan de transport de Montréal* (Montréal Transport Plan), which aims "to consolidate Montréal's pedestrian character by pedestrianizing streets ..." (23). While the 2008 plan includes directives for the city to "create a guide for the design of public roads and parks to meet the needs of pedestrians, including universal accessibility criteria," the responsibility for planning and implementing pedestrian spaces is directed to boroughs (2008:23).

In terms of universal accessibility, the city of Montréal adopted its *Charte montréalaise des droits et responsabilités* (Montréal Charter of Rights and Responsibilities) in 2005 (Ville de Montréal, 2005) de Montre, which includes the objective of "promoting universal access in the development of its territory." In 2011, the city of Montréal implemented its *Politique municipale d'accessibilité universelle* (Municipal Universal Accessibility Policy), a short document focusing mainly on overarching commitments, such as to "integrate universal accessibility into all stages of decision-making..." (2011: 1). Specifically, the city defines universal accessibility as that which "enables everyone, regardless of their abilities, to use the same or similar services offered to the entire population, independently and simultaneously" (ibid). Policies relating to aging have been integrated in this framework, including the *Plan d'action municipale pour les aînés* (Municipal Action Plan for Older Adults, implemented in 2013 and 2018) (Ville de Montréal, 2013; 2018). The *Stratégie municipale pour les personnes aînées 2023–2030* (Municipal Strategy for Older Adults) encompasses primary goals to "Meet basic needs equitably;" "Facilitate development and resilience;" and "Support community participation" (Ville de Montréal, 2023b: 7). Related policies have aimed to improve snow removal on sidewalks so that people with functional limitations can more easily access the outdoors during the winter (Ville de Montréal, 2015; 2019).

In terms of pedestrian streets, the City of Montréal released its *Programme d'implantation de rues piétonnes et partagées* (Implementation Program for Pedestrian and Shared Streets) in 2017 (Ville de Montréal, 2017: 10), aiming to support Montréal's 19 boroughs to "increase the surface area of public space dedicated to pedestrians," and "involve the community in public space transformations..." (ibid). Although universal accessibility is mentioned three times in this policy, it does not include any specific definitions, guidelines, or requirements for the planning, implementation, or monitoring of accessibility interventions. Indeed, while the directive and overarching framework for street experiments has been provided by Montréal's municipal government, the responsibility for implementing, monitoring and evaluating these processes on Wellington Street falls on the Verdun Borough.

Table 1
Sample characteristics.

Sample characteristic	Number of interviewees
Gender	
Women	6
Men	4
Age	
65–75	6
74–85	4
Disability	
Physical disabilities	4
Non-disabled	6
Educational Background	
Highschool	1
Trade/Technical school	3
Undergraduate degree	4
Graduate degree	2
Civic Engagement	
Regular involvement in civic consultations or groups	6
Not involved	4
Income Level	
10,000–29,999	1
30,000–59,999	5
60,000–89,999	3
90,000–119,999	1

While Wellington Street has a rich history of short car-free street festivals, pedestrianization became a more prominent matter of concern in recent years. In 2017, the borough worked to implement a public-consultation process on the experimental redesign of a one-block section of Wellington Street. The full pedestrianization of the 1.3 km section denominated *la rue Wellington piétonne* (Fig. 1) came into effect on a seasonal basis in 2021 and has been reinitiated every summer thus far. Although the Verdun Borough has developed a unique universal accessibility policy, striving for “an inclusive approach that takes into account the different needs and living conditions of individuals” and a “barrier-free living environment for people with functional limitations” (Arrondissement de Verdun, 2023), it is unclear how this plan is integrated in the design in street experiments, apart from one mention on the Wellington St. webpage on facilitating “accessibility for people with reduced mobility...” (Ville de Montréal, 2023a).

The slated public consultation process on the prospect of permanently pedestrianizing Wellington Street is the result of a citizen-led movement named *La Well piétonne*. As per a municipal process called *le droit d'initiative* (Right of Initiative), adopted by the city in 2010, Montréalers can obtain public consultations on a subject of public interest through a petition-based process. Based on this framework, members of the citizens' movement drafted a petition titled *Piétonner la rue Wellington en permanence* (Permanently Pedestrianize Wellington Street) in early 2023 which advocates “(i)n the interests of the community, ... to pedestrianize this street permanently” (La Well Piétonne, 2023). The petition led by the social movement posited that a year-round, pedestrian-only street “would make Verdun a more pleasant, healthy, ecological, equitable, accessible, *child-friendly*, and socially integrated neighbourhood aligned with our community's ambitions and values” (emphasis ours). After obtaining over 3000 signatures within the 90-day limit stipulated by the city, the public-consultation session was formally approved in 2023 and carried out by the Verdun Borough and Montréal's Public Consultation Office (OCPM by its French acronym) between 2024–2025, with results to be released at a later date.^{1 and 2} It is worth noting that although Montréal's *Right of Initiative* has been available since 2010, there have only been limited cases in which this petition-based process has been successful in obtaining the necessary signatures to trigger a public consultation process,² making the citizen-led movement to pedestrianize Wellington St. distinctive. That said, a spokesperson from the Verdun borough claimed that the cost of pedestrianizing Wellington Street in the summer amounted to roughly \$CND 935,000 in 2022, and that “the borough will have the final say on the matter,” regardless of the public-consultation process (Nerestant & Dayan-Perez, 2023).

Taken together, these policy processes underscore the city's ambitious goals of building pro-pedestrian, universally accessible, and age-friendly streetscapes. However, these initiatives raise questions regarding the spatial and seasonal limits of the city's pedestrian street projects as well as regarding how universal accessibility and age-inclusive strategies are being monitored. The emergence of a grassroots movement working to push the temporal limits of the city's pedestrian projects offers an interesting case for exploring the possibility of more long-term transitions. While this movement appears to place an emphasis on equity objectives, the rather limited focus on child-friendliness raises further questions from the perspective of aging in place, meriting increased discussion with older adults.

6. Interview findings

Our thematic analysis of interview data uncovered key opportunities and challenges associated with Wellington Street's transformations from the perspective of older adults. Specifically, we identified four emergent themes, including (1) public image and social class, (2) winter challenges and opportunities, (3) the continued struggle for universal accessibility, and (4) civic engagement.

6.1. Public image and social class

Having resided in Verdun for anywhere from five years to an entire lifetime, interview participants contextualized their comments on Wellington Street in relation to the changing character and public image of the neighbourhood. Many commented on the historic “*discrimination in how Verdun was perceived in the public image*,” including the reputation of a “*low-income neighbourhood*” and stereotypes associated with “*people on social assistance*.” Despite these characterizations, long-term residents remembered their adolescence in Verdun with fondness, describing the neighbourhood as a “*small village where everyone knew each other*.” The recent transformation of Wellington Street—affectionately referred to as ‘*ma well*’ by some locals—was often described in relation to wider changes to the neighbourhood, including “*greater social diversity*,” and “*small changes that progressively made for a more humane environment*.”

The pedestrianization of Wellington Street was generally seen as a positive step in improving both the neighbourhood's public image and the availability of amenities for supporting an aging population. Interviewees recognized that “*some local businesses are against it*,” but supported pedestrianization as something that “*revitalizes the neighbourhood*,” particularly in light of public art and free cultural activities, such as the marionette festival, music, comedy shows, etc. (Fig. 2).

At the same time, Wellington Street's new-found coolness was not universally accepted. One public-transit user commented: “*I don't understand why Wellington was named the world's coolest street...*” Another participant assessed that “*to have a permanent pedestrian street, there would need to be more important points of interest... It's not like Barcelona...*”

Others shared concerns relating to the redevelopment of the neighbourhood and its impact on low-income residents; however, these concerns were not connected to skepticism about pedestrianization. For many of those interviewed, the movement to permanently make Wellington pedestrian-only represents an important step in creating an inclusive neighbourhood, “*not just for tourists, but also for ordinary people*”—a process that requires concrete policies and programs to “*increase the availability of affordable housing*” and “*the universal accessibility of residences*.”

While the interviews reveal variations in terms of support for the pedestrianization process, reflecting wider levels of disagreement across the neighbourhood, they share common concerns surrounding issues of residential displacement and the social inclusivity of the neighborhood, which merit careful attention in urban planning and policymaking. These perspectives provoke a deeper analysis on the impacts of urban experiments in terms of neighbourhood liveability, social cohesion, and affordability.

6.2. Winter challenges and opportunities

Another significant point of contention related to walking and the prospect of pedestrianizing Wellington Street during the winter. For some, the idea of closing the street to car traffic in the winter was “*absolutely ridiculous*,” considering the reliance of certain residents on cars and public transit for making multiple stops along Wellington Street during the colder months.

That said, most interviewees fully supported the idea of a pedestrian winter streetscape “*in the spirit of embracing the winter*.” For example, some participants liked the idea of “*winter activities both for children and*

¹ The OCPM's report is available here: <https://ocpm.qc.ca/fr/wellington>.

² Other notable cases include a 2012 consultation on urban agriculture and a 2018 consultation on systemic racism and discrimination (with the latter being triggered by the work of 50 youth community leaders who collected over 20,000 signatures) (<https://Montréalaction.com/en/petition>).



Fig. 2. Illustrative examples from Wellington Street. Source: Authors.

people of all ages” on Wellington Street, such as an outdoor ice-skating rink. Winter pedestrianization was seen as beneficial for older adults who “don’t have as much social contact in the winter” and “would benefit from seeing more people out in the street” as well as “having access to a snow-cleared pedestrian walkway in the winter.” These comments point to the potentials of winter pedestrianization to support positive social interactions, comfortable year-round walking, and older residents’ well-being. Notably, this framing shifts understandings of winter from a barrier to be endured into a cultural resource that can animate public space rather than drive people indoors.

Beyond somewhat polarized opinions on the possibility of pedestrianizing Wellington Street during the winter, interviewees emphasized the importance of improved facilities for winter walking across the wider neighbourhood, pointing to the need for a broader approach to pedestrian rights beyond the spatial limits of street experiments. Interviewees cited problems such as “huge frozen puddles” that accumulate in the curb cuts, which prevent safe street crossings, “aggressive drivers” that become less attentive to pedestrians in the winter, and “ice-covered sidewalks” that are a significant risk while walking. As one participant pointed out, “In the winter, many people prefer to walk on the street because they have better snow removal and de-icing there...” Some touched on the ineffectiveness of municipal policies, noting: “There is a municipal regulation that requires that the companies responsible for clearing the roads should not push the snow onto the sidewalks, but it’s not respected.” A wheelchair user noted that these concerns are amplified for mobility-aid users during the winter months, as “a lack of proper snow and ice clearance [on sidewalks] prevents the ability to go outside,” leading to a situation in where many are forced to “remain at home inside for the majority of the winter.”

Notwithstanding the challenges associated with winter walking, many participants emphasized the importance of walking throughout the year for their health and wellbeing. One interviewee explained: “I enjoy walking every day because it is good for my health, and otherwise I wouldn’t exercise very much. It’s also important for me to be outside in contact with others. If we speak about crossing paths with others and feeling life around us, it’s good for our mental health. I spend a lot of time at home, so it’s nice to get outside and see other citizens.” These accounts reveal how winter walkability is not merely a matter of comfort, but also of access, autonomy, and everyday prosperity.

Given the strong values, social meanings, and personal health objectives that older adults ascribe to walking and winter mobilities, these comments underscore a need for concerted interventions to support walkable winter environments within and beyond the spatial edges of pedestrian streets. These perspectives highlight both the limitations of existing pedestrian-street initiatives in supporting walkability for older adults within Verdun’s unique climate, built-environment and policy landscape, as well as potential opportunities for using street experiments

as a leverage to support age-friendly winter-walking environments across the wider neighbourhood.

6.3. The continued struggle for universal accessibility

One of the most significant themes found in the interview data related to concerns about universal design. While interviewees expressed a general sense of satisfaction about the accessibility of the temporary street amenities during the summer months, older adults with disabilities underscored some particular issues on Wellington Street. For example, one wheelchair user underscored ongoing issues in terms of “the accessibility of local shops” including “the majority of pharmacies, large food chains, and smaller grocery stores... Many of these businesses don’t have electric doors, and I’ve had to ask many times if they can simply place a sign with their phone number, ...so that wheelchair users can at least call to have them open the door. And others have mobility ramps, but it’s not properly indicated...Or they don’t have an accessible bathroom...” While many highlighted that these are longstanding issues in Verdun, they noted that “this should not still be happening” particularly considering the emphasis of the city and borough on making cultural activities more accessible. These frustrations point to a deeper tension between the intended inclusivity of street interventions and the persistent structural barriers embedded in the built environment.

In terms of the pop-up amenities used on Wellington during the summer months, most participants expressed contentment, including new accessible public benches and tables. However, one interviewee explained that although the borough added a few temporary



Fig. 3a. Temporary metal accessibility ramp on Wellington Street. Source: Authors.

accessibility ramps (Figs. 3a and 3b) to facilitate movement between the sidewalk and the street, there exists a disparity between mobility-aid users and others “because when I go [out] on Wellington Street with my neighbours, they can easily access the street but I have to go out of my way to find a ramp... For me, universal accessibility means having everything the same for everyone.” While the addition of temporary ramps signals an incremental step toward greater inclusion, this account illustrates how minimal accessibility accommodations can inadvertently reproduce the very experiences of marginalization they seek to overcome. When not matched by comprehensive and spatially consistent implementation, these small accessibility gestures risk reinforcing a two-tiered pedestrian experience in which full participation remains contingent on extra effort and negotiation, rather than its guarantee.

Another issue cited by people with disabilities related to the *balançoires* (swinging benches) that were implemented during the summer of 2021, which were advertised as universally accessible, but that failed in this respect (Fig. 4a). As one wheelchair user explained: “I went to test them, and it was impossible to get up considering the size and slope of the ramp... Perhaps because it was made by someone quickly, or without necessarily having the right knowledge or competences.” While these swinging benches were not brought back the following years, some participants noted that they missed this interactive street furniture, which they felt was important for “socializing with neighbours,” and simply required adjustments in terms of accessibility. One interviewee commented that this was a “missed opportunity to rebuild more accessible swings as a permanent feature of Wellington Street,” commenting on the opportunity to replicate a universally accessibility model in a local park (Fig. 4b).

These comments suggest that while temporary street experiments are often promoted as transformative tools, rapid interventions also pose risks of bypassing universal accessibility auditing and meaningful involvement of the disability community in the planning process. The testimonial underscores the need to develop and monitor universal accessibility measures with community members as an iterative process to ensure that pedestrianized streets and surrounding public spaces do not reproduce or intensify the disabling environments that people with disabilities are forced to contend with on a regular basis.

6.4. Civic engagement

A significant finding from the interviews related to the immense values that many older individuals associate with the public-consultation process. Although some commented on the “high levels of emotions and animosity between those who are strongly pro and against” winter pedestrianization, several participants discussed the important



Fig. 3b. Temporary wooden accessibility ramp on Wellington Street. Source: Authors.

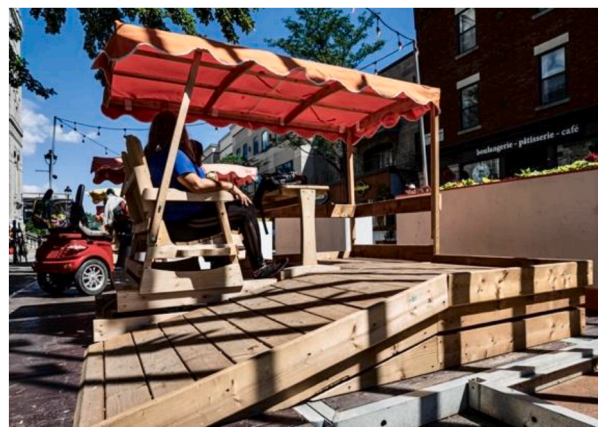


Fig. 4a. Temporary swinging benches tested on Wellington Street (summer 2021). Source: Authors.



Fig. 4b. Permanent, universally accessible swing in Parc Archie-Wilcox, Verdun. Source: Authors.

opportunity afforded by the citizens’ petition and public consultations about Wellington Street that “allow for a deeper level of citizen engagement and participation in local issues.” For example, some participants noted that they remained undecided on the matter of permanently pedestrianizing Wellington Street, explaining that they hope to “listen carefully to everyone’s opinions through the public-consultation process” as a means of making an informed choice. Others expressed enthusiasm about the possibility of creating “a type of citizens’ square where different sorts of community organizations can have meetings or workshops” as a permanent feature of Wellington Street. Other ideas included “a mobile citizens’ hub where people can go to share their thoughts and opinions” as a part of the pedestrianization process.

Indeed, many of the interviewed older adults are incredibly active in local civic culture, be it through regularly attending borough council meetings, volunteering with local organizations, involvement with active-transportation advocacy groups, local accessibility committees, and even exchanging regular messages with the borough mayor to provide suggestions. Some participants reflected on the successful outcomes of previous civic engagement activities, such as improved cycling infrastructure as well as improved affordable housing policies. For these individuals, civic engagement is extremely valuable, not only in considering the future of Wellington Street, but also the wider neighbourhood and region. That said, one participant explained that while they would like to be more involved in public-consultation processes, they were rarely able to attend such events in person because they “don’t feel safe walking and taking the bus that late at night.”

Many expanded on the importance of involving older adults in civic-

engagement activities. As one participant explained: “I think that older adults have a certain expertise that we can bring to the table. It’s not like when you reach retirement that everything disappears. And I find that we need to hold onto this power, to work with younger people who can learn from our experience and knowledge on important environmental and social issues.” Another expanded “I think there’s an opportunity for older adults to work a day or two per week with local organizations, and to be paid to do this work, which can help to lessen loneliness and to improve our milieux.”

In terms of the importance of engagement with the disability community, one participant elucidated: *We have a local citizen’s committee that formed over the past five years [by and for people with disabilities], so we work very, very hard. I know there are a lot of big organizations that specialize in universal accessibility, but there’s nothing like ‘les usagers’ ... The experts are the ones with [lived] experience.*”

These points speak to the potential for pedestrian street initiatives to offer more age-inclusive opportunities for participation, particularly for those who have traditionally had limited access to planning processes. In addition to speaking to the importance of civic engagement to provide older residents with opportunities to advocate for their needs, these perspectives also help to challenge deficit-based narratives of aging that frame older adults primarily as recipients of care or accommodation, and instead foreground their potential as active knowledge-holders and civic contributors.

7. Discussion & conclusion

Urban experimentation has emerged as a preferred method for testing pedestrian-friendly innovations across a range of global contexts with the aim of igniting large-scale transitions to sustainability (Bertolini, 2020; H.-Y. Chan et al., 2026; Marcheschi et al., 2022; Scerri & Attard, 2023; Sengers et al., 2019; VanHoose et al., 2022, 2025). Researchers have explored how pedestrian experiments have been mobilized to promote environmental, social, and public health goals (Sengers et al., 2019; Smeds & Papa, 2023; VanHoose & Bertolini, 2023) as well as the forms of political or public backlash that can emerge alongside pedestrianization (Hickman & Huaylla Sallo, 2022; Nello-Deakin, 2023; Schreiber, 2025; Verlinghieri et al., 2023; Vitale Brovarone et al., 2023). While quantitative studies have shown varying levels of support and opposition to street experiments from older adults (Amistad, 2010; Castillo-Manzano et al., 2014; Nello-Deakin et al., 2024; Te Boveldt et al., 2023), our analysis revealed the need for a contextualized and qualitative focus that considers the particularities of evolving local policies, neighbourhood histories, climate conditions, built-environment characteristics, affordability constraints, and social dynamics of aging in place.

Our policy analysis traced Montréal’s elaborate goals of building pro-pedestrian streetscapes over the past two decades. These policies have evolved from rather loose propositions regarding a shared right-of-way, to more pluralistic walkability strategies encompassing a range of age-friendly goals, planning guidelines, regulations, and projects. A significant question arising from this analysis relates to the temporal limits of the city’s recent pedestrian street initiatives considering the emphasis on the summer months and gradual approach to policy implementation. The success of the citizens’ petition in triggering a public consultation process on permanent pedestrianization in the Verdun neighbourhood suggests that a sizable portion of neighbourhood residents may be unconvinced by the city’s seasonal approach to implementing pedestrian streets, or that they are least eager to create more space for open public deliberation on the topic. Our purpose in integrating interviews with older adults is not to quantify which individuals are strongly “pro” or “anti” pedestrianization. Rather, we hope that an in-depth interview approach focused on understanding heterogeneous experiences and forms of knowledge can help in cultivating careful thinking regarding the relationship between experimental urbanism and aging in place.

As is to be expected with a major topic of public contention, our findings are reflective of a range of perspectives on the prospects of a

year-round pedestrian street, but they point to an overwhelming openness to community deliberation and consensus building. For example, even those who were the most skeptical about the potential for winter pedestrianization seemed open to the possibility of a continued summer pedestrian street provided that public-transit alternatives remain easily accessible. Considering the borough’s portrayal of pedestrianization as an extremely high-cost endeavor (Nerestant & Dayan-Perez, 2023), and the levels of neighbourhood disagreement about the economic viability of winter pedestrianization (Ducas, 2024), providing transparent fiscal data on the actual costs associated with maintaining transport infrastructure for different modes (i.e., the cost of motor-vehicle roadways and parking in comparison to cycling and pedestrian infrastructure) will be crucial to provide appropriate comparisons between sustainable transport projects and car-oriented ones.

Indeed, many of those interviewed expressed support for year-round pedestrianization as a means of uplifting the neighbourhoods’ “small village” character, contributing to a positive sense of local identity, embracing the city’s nordicity, as well as nurturing conviviality to help reduce social isolation for an aging population. For most interviewees, such interventions require a targeted focus on housing affordability considering recent neighbourhood changes and the acceleration of a rental-housing crisis in the area. As housing affordability is directly tied to the ability of many older adults to age in place (Weil et al., 2024), these concerns exemplify the need to further explore opportunities for strengthening the links between pedestrianization policies, neighbourhood stabilization strategies, and age-inclusivity goals. This includes aligning street redesign initiatives with measures such as rent control and housing assistance programs to mitigate displacement risks, as well as embedding universal design principles into pedestrian infrastructure to ensure that pedestrian environments remain accessible and adapted to older residents’ needs.

A significant point of concern in this study relates to the spatial and seasonal limitations of existing pedestrian streets considering residents’ aspiration for more inclusive walking environments across the wider neighbourhood. Suggestions for improving walkability included better citywide monitoring and regulation of snow-clearance policies and de-icing for sidewalks, as well as improved street lighting and pedestrian crossings. While these planning recommendations are relevant for improving winter walkability for all neighbourhood residents, they bear particular significance from the perspective of age inclusivity. In light of the emotive social values that older adults find in walking and spending time outdoors throughout the year as a significant aspect of the process of aging in place, our findings underscore a need for comprehensive interventions to enhance winter walkability as a means of supporting older adults’ wellbeing. Such interventions could include targeted snow and ice removal programs for pedestrian streets, winter-friendly seating and lighting enhancement, and regular winter events. Importantly, these findings reflect the subjective perspectives of older adults, highlighting how personal feelings of safety, comfort, and social connection influence their decisions to walk and engage with public space (Kim et al., 2024; Ottoni et al., 2016). By accounting for these perceptions, interventions can be designed not only to improve physical accessibility but also to support older adults’ confidence, motivation, and everyday mobility practices. While our findings reveal the limitations of existing pedestrian street initiatives in supporting winter walkability for older adults within our unique case study context, they also point to potential opportunities—both in Montréal and beyond—for using street experiments as a catalyst to support age-friendly winter walking environments across wider neighbourhoods.

Another question arising from our analysis relates to the extent to which Montréal’s universal accessibility policies are being operationalized, monitored, and evaluated, particularly given that the city’s lack of clear directives for boroughs in developing street experiments in alignment with disability inclusion goals (as discussed in Section 5). As other researchers have highlighted, such policies provide a good starting place, but still lack enforcement mechanisms and measurable built

environment outcomes (Parent, 2021; Soliz et al., 2026). This paper brings these points into greater conversation with the discussions on street experiments and aging in place. From the perspective of some interviewees, temporary street transformations offer an innovative means of experimenting with the development of more age-supportive urban environments. For others, transitory interventions run the risk of intensifying inequities between disabled and able-bodied residents, for example where longstanding issues with the inaccessibility of local businesses remain unaddressed, or where minimal accessibility ramps are provided between the street and the sidewalk (e.g., Figs. 3a & 3b). Such issues can result in added articulation work for mobility-aid users in navigating an experimental streetscape, a process that reconfigures rather than remedying *disabling environments*. The borough's implementation of supposedly accessible swinging benches in 2021 exemplifies these tensions (Figure 4), creating an illusion of universal accessibility that never materialized in practice.

These findings, read alongside the policy analysis, reveal a persistent gap between Montréal's age-inclusive streetscape commitments and their operationalization at the street level. While the city has progressively layered pedestrian-priority frameworks (from the 2006 Pedestrian Charter through to the 2017 Implementation Program for Pedestrian and Shared Streets) the devolution of planning responsibility without clear accessibility directives creates conditions in which universal accessibility risks remaining aspirational rather than enacted. Older adults' accounts of inaccessible businesses, inadequate winter maintenance, and symbolically rather than substantively accessible interventions are thus not incidental oversights, but reflect the on-the-ground consequences of a policy framework that lacks enforceable standards and measurable outcomes. Together, both strands of analysis point to the need for stronger policy alignment, and for the integration of older adults' experiential knowledge so that commitments to aging in place are grounded in the lived realities of those they are intended to serve.

A growing body of critical urban research has highlighted how disability injustices have been maintained or reconfigured across urban planning and design processes despite advances in disability rights treaties and anti-discrimination legislation (Bell et al., 2024; Hamraie, 2017; Jodoin et al., 2020; Norcliffe & Radford, 2025; Stafford et al., 2022). From issues of inaccessible buildings and public washrooms (Buliung & Solomon, 2022; Mohapatra et al., 2024), to minimally compliant public transportation (Bezyak et al., 2017; Levine & Karner, 2023), to tokenistic public consultation processes (Ross et al., 2023; Soliz et al., 2026), this research underscores the imperative to address issues of entrenched ableism and exclusion in the process of building more sustainable urban environments. Notwithstanding the frequent portrayal of street experiments as transformative tools (Marcheschi et al., 2022; Smeds & Papa, 2023), our study brings this literature into conversation with critical aging and disabilities theorizing, contributing an understanding of how fast-paced pedestrianization initiatives can pose risks of reproducing patterns of universal inaccessibility, age-unfriendliness, and disability injustice. These findings reveal how street-experiment interventions—especially those that make claims relating to disability and age inclusivity—must take universal accessibility and participatory design more seriously if they are to succeed in advancing their social inclusion goals, including opportunities for meaningful involvement of diverse members of the disability and aging communities in urban planning processes. Indeed, while ideas about barrier-free design have been around since the 1950s, critical disability scholars increasingly recognize the need to move beyond technocratic approaches universal accessibility that treat disability as a 'problem' or that attempt to modify that built environment *for* disabled people and instead working toward a radical appreciation of human difference in the process of co-designing *with* disability communities (Guffey, 2023; Hamraie & Fritsch, 2019).

Verdun benefits from a vibrant disability community, and the borough's unique universal accessibility policy is the result of immense

work on the part of these individuals. Rather than doing away with street transformations, our findings suggest the need for greater integration between pedestrian and universal accessibility policies, while meaningfully engaging older-adult and disability communities and incorporating their expertise as a central component of the transformation process. We suggest that this process may necessitate moving beyond ephemeral and fast-paced interventions and towards deep consideration of how to redesign streets in the long-term so that *"everything is the same for everyone."*

Through an exploration of older adults' civic-engagement goals, our findings support previous calls for addressing institutional barriers to public participation and "recovering the political" in urban experiments (Sierhuis et al., 2024; VanHoose & Bertolini, 2023). Our study contributes to this literature through a social perspective on aging, revealing how Montréal's policy focus on older adults offers an important starting place for addressing not only their mobility concerns, but also for enhancing opportunities for community participation and social-support networks as a part of the process of aging in place. Undeniably, this focus on involving older adults in street experiments may require navigating a range of practical and social trade-offs, as limited municipal budgets, time, and staff can constrain the scale or frequency of older adults' engagement (Kong et al., 2025; Warner & Zhang, 2021). Moreover, older adults' priorities, such as safety, accessibility, and comfort, can sometimes conflict with broader neighbourhood revitalization goals, creating tensions in design and policy decisions (Buffel et al., 2012; Buffel & Phillipson, 2019). Without careful attention, these tensions could inadvertently reinforce inequalities, privileging more affluent or politically engaged residents, and threaten long-term age-inclusive objectives. While recognizing and planning for these trade-offs is essential, equally critical is the imperative to work towards open and inclusive planning processes to ensure that street transformations equitably reflect the diverse needs and experiences of older adults.

Verdun's civil-society movement for winter pedestrianization reveals community aspirations to expand the limits of public-consultation processes, pushing for open public deliberation on street experiments that are seasonally inclusive. Such approaches were by-and-large supported by those interviewed in this study considering the value of social interactions and civic engagement in the aging process. Interviewees stressed the importance of civic engagement for contributing to decisions on built environment changes that support older adults' *hedonic wellbeing* while also advancing a sense of fulfillment and purpose in life, or *eudaimonic wellbeing*. Policies focused on street experimentation and aging in place can benefit from further recognizing the diversity, agency, and expertise offered by older adults, helping to cultivate more supportive, human-scale environments. For example, municipalities could implement stronger participatory planning programs, age-inclusive advisory committees, or co-design workshops that actively involve older residents in decision-making processes.

Considering the personal security concerns expressed by some women in attending public consultation sessions held in the evening, our findings indicate that an intersectional focus is pertinent to understanding the relationship between age and gender-based inequities and to devise strategies that are sensitive to such disparities. Similarly, interviewees provided insightful recommendations regarding the potential to provide some form of compensation to older adults—especially those with greater financial need—for their substantial volunteer work in local organizations and civic-engagement processes. While intersectional theorizing on aging and disabilities is gaining momentum in sociological and health research (Frederick & Shifrer, 2019; Jason et al., 2023; Rogers et al., 2020), our findings point to a need for deeper engagement with these perspectives in the transportation and aging literature. Considering the small-scale, exploratory nature of this study, we believe that an intersectional perspective on urban experimentation and aging in place offers promise. Future research would benefit from increased attention to possible challenges relating to affordability, gentrification, and/or neighbourhood displacement for older adults that

could be correlated with urban experiments (Villar-Abeijón et al., 2025) as well as the potential for collaborative policymaking, inclusionary zoning, rent control and other household/neighbourhood stabilization strategies to help mitigate such issues (Chapple et al., 2022).

As a limitation to this paper, although thematic saturation was reached in terms of interviewees' views on the pedestrianization of Wellington Street, the sample was skewed toward university educated and civically engaged older adults. The findings may therefore reflect a degree of self-selection bias, with participants' views shaped by higher levels of political awareness and involvement, particularly regarding what is actionable in the context of Wellington's permanent pedestrianization, limiting the diversity of captured perspectives. Future research would benefit from including participants with varying levels of education and civic engagement, particularly those who are not formally involved in local planning processes. Moreover, given that interviews were conducted at a specific moment in time, the findings may not fully represent how public perceptions or impacts of urban experiments such as pedestrianization evolve over time. Longitudinal data could provide deeper insight into how these views and experiences change.

Collectively, this study has offered a case-study approach for exploring experimental strategies, objectives, barriers, and facilitators for building more walkable and age-friendly neighbourhoods. Rather than aging in fixed or stationary places, we suggest that aging increasingly happens amidst the transience of experimental milieus. In experimental worlds, the movement for pedestrian streets coalesces with the promise of an equitable and inclusive urban future. Such visions have succeeded in gathering significant cultural appeal and promissory potential. Beyond their discursive edges, such experiments are brought into contrast with the realities faced by many aging individuals in navigating often hostile and inaccessible walking environments. Addressing this disjuncture requires careful thinking, intersectional perspectives, and socially engaged approaches that recognize the agency and knowledge of an aging population. As urban planning becomes a field of growing experimentation, we posit that designing age-friendly cities must attend to the social complexities of aging in experimental places.

CRedit authorship contribution statement

Aryana Soliz: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Visualization, Validation, Resources, Project administration, Methodology, Investigation, Funding acquisition, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Meredith Alousi-Jones:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Visualization, Investigation, Funding acquisition, Formal analysis, Data curation. **Ahmed El-Geneidy:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Resources, Methodology, Funding acquisition, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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