INTRODUCTION

This chapter is based on the insight that person–environment relationships are essential components of the quality of life (QoL) of older people (Lawton, 1991; Walker, 2005). In addition to the social environment, the maintenance and improvement of autonomy and well-being of ageing individuals have much to do with the utilisation and optimisation of environmental resources such as housing and local amenities. Nevertheless, the mainstream of QoL research concerned with older people seldom provides in-depth consideration of the role of the environment as people age and, if it does, it is the social environment that is given primacy most frequently.

In our own treatment of environmental aspects of QoL, in this chapter, we will concentrate – in line with what frequently has been coined environmental gerontology (Lawton, 1999; Wahl, 2001; Wahl and Gitlin, 2007) – on the physical-spatial and material part of the environment and its relationship to outcomes like autonomy, well-being, and societal participation. The physical environment refers to the totality of the diverse range of phenomena, events, and forces that exist outside the ageing individual and that are directly linked to the material and spatial sphere. Lawton (1999, p.106) has been even more rigorous in his definition of the physical environment as ‘all that lies outside the skin of the participant, is animate, and may be specified by counting or by measuring in centimeters, grams, or seconds’. Furthermore, a necessary distinction within the realm of the physical environment is the one between the home environment and the out-of-home environment. The home environment includes the physical structure of all spatial components available as a potential resource or constraining force for a given inhabitant and eventual co-inhabitants in a given house or apartment. When it comes to out-of-home environments, it is difficult to provide a more clear-cut definition in addition to the very general approach offered by Lawton (1999). We will concentrate on outdoor mobility and transportation issues and their implications for QoL. The use of public areas has many direct relationships to autonomy and well-being, for example, via the accessibility of parks, shopping areas, or public buildings. Also, outdoor mobility is a major sphere that is able to support or undermine independence and well-being and thus to force or prevent disability.

Although we primarily refer to ‘the physical environment’ and use this term throughout the chapter, all the social, societal and cultural accoutrements, and implications of the physical environment are also acknowledged (see Wahl and Lang, 2004; for an in-depth discussion of this issue). It should also be emphasised that we will concentrate on person–physical environment interactions in the realm of
community dwelling older people, because differences in ageing in the private household setting and ageing in institutional environments are such that it would be too much to consider both in depth in one chapter.

DEFINING QoL DRIVEN BY A PERSON–ENVIRONMENT PERSPECTIVE

Lawton (1991, p.6) has provided the field with a definition of QoL that directly addresses the environment: ‘Quality of Life is the multidimensional evaluation, by both intrapersonal and social-normative criteria, of the person–environment system of an individual in time past, current, and anticipated’. Most importantly, Lawton uses the term person–environment system as an indication that personal life and ageing are always embedded in given environmental conditions able to shape the overall QoL for better or worse. However, not all environments are equal when it comes to the QoL these environments offer. An important facet of this view is that the physical environment provides a major context and a major outcome of the QoL of older people. Another related idea is that older people should be regarded as capable of proactively selecting and shaping their physical environments in accordance with their needs and functional capacities (Lawton, 1989). This should not exclude, however, the obvious fact that there are limits to such proactivity in the case of major competence loss such as with dementia-related disorders.

Furthermore, the intrapersonal component points to the role of the internal standards of an older person, which are also critical, when it comes to the evaluation of the physical environment. On the one hand, studies on housing and neighbourhood satisfaction have shown significantly lower satisfaction scores in areas of poor quality (Mollenkopf et al., 2004a; Mollenkopf and Kaspar, 2005). On the other hand, there is often a paradox to be found, underpinning the observation that high residential satisfaction can be observed in situations of rather low objective housing standard (Oswald et al., 2003a). It thus seems of limited value to focus only on subjective or only objective criteria when it comes to the physical environment.

In addition, what Lawton (1991) has coined as social-normative criteria gains importance regarding home and out-of-home environments. For example, legally based regulations and guidelines drive community understanding and inform social policy as to what ‘good environments’ in the realm of housing or out-of-home environments are for ageing individuals and what kind of adaptations are needed to achieve given objective standards. Conflicts between intrapersonal and social-normative criteria are rather common in ageing people’s relationships to their physical environments and thus frequently make the definition of QoL a difficult task. A classic example is barrier-free environments, using generally accepted and/or legally based criteria, which may suggest profound housing modifications in a given person–environment system with clearly expected positive QoL outcomes, such as prevention of falls and support of long-term independence. However, it is not rare for such externally identified environmental modification needs to find acceptance by the older person, because there is high residential satisfaction and no subjectively experienced need towards environmental improvement.