Chapter 1

Designing for older users

Felicia Huppert
University of Cambridge
New ageing

We are living in a unique historical period. Never before could people expect to live so long. Never before have older people formed such a large proportion of the total population. Never before have physical and mental capabilities remained so high into advanced old age. The speed of these changes has been remarkable, and our societal structures, attitudes and policies are struggling to come to grips with the implications of these changes.

The sheer numbers and proportions of older people, together with their spending power, provide a strong business case for designers and manufacturers to cater to older consumers (see chapter 7, Living longer). The need for design change is not limited to consumer products. It should also be a priority for designers involved in the public services. From design of printed matter and communication and information technology, to the design of transport, housing and public buildings, a better understanding of users’ needs can dramatically improve the independence and quality of life of the vast number of older users. But for these endeavours to be most effective, we need to go beyond the numbers, to understand the lifestyles of today’s older adults, as well as their physical and mental capabilities.

The changing lifestyles of older adults

A major effect of increased life expectancy is the rise in the number of multi-generational families. It is becoming commonplace for children to have living grandparents and great grandparents. Individuals in their 40s, 50s and 60s have been described as ‘the sandwich generation’, because they frequently have children and grandchildren to nurture, as well as parents and grandparents to care for. Moreover, as a result of the increasing divorce rate, large numbers of middle-aged and older adults have an extensive range of step-kin with whom they interact. These changes in family structure have profound implications for how older people organise their lives. Most design-oriented research on older consumers tends to focus on older people in isolation, rather than within the context of their extensive kin network with its implications for time use, communication, travel and spending.

There is also enormous variation in the lifestyles of older people, and chronological age is becoming an increasingly unreliable predictor of lifestyle. Large numbers of older people have childcare