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'Somewhere old, somewhere new, somewhere green': An exploration of health enabling places from the perspective of people ageing-in-place in Ireland during COVID-19

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Abstract

Drawing on conceptual and empirical work in geographies of ageing and environmental gerontology, this study's aim is to explore the generation and maintenance of enabling places from the perspective of older community dwellers in the context of COVID-19. Findings are drawn from a qualitative thematic analysis of written submissions ($n=17$), narrative interviews ($n=44$) and go-along interviews ($n=5$) with people ageing-in-place in Irish communities during the pandemic. The mean age of participants was 74.9 (SD $=7$; range 65–96), 53% were female, 46% lived alone, and 86% lived in areas with high urban influence. Our results indicate that the COVID-19 public health restrictions curtailed participants' usual activities and influenced how they related to their homes, and a variety of public spaces where they had previously pursued valued activities. Transitions in their everyday geographies led to a wide array of affective and embodied experiences, and participants described diverse material and social emplaced-resources as enabling or hindering their health and well-being during COVID-19. Our core findings are summarised across three themes: (1) somewhere old, relates to emplacement in familiar places and the role of familiarity with place resources; (2) somewhere new, comprises the emergence of digital spaces and possible pathways to build place insideness; and (3) somewhere green, describes the negotiation and (re)turn to natural and outdoor environments during the pandemic. Results from this study contribute to identify the pathways through which enabling places for diverse older people may be generated and/or maintained, and provide evidence to support the development of enabling environments during times of social upheaval and beyond.

KEYWORDS
ageing-in-place, COVID-19, enabling places, geographies of ageing, Ireland, qualitative analysis

1 | INTRODUCTION

Since the late 1970s, geographers have contributed to theorising the role of place in later life and investigated how diverse settings can support older people's capabilities to be and to do what they have reason to value (Cresswell, 2014; Harper & Laws, 1995; Skinner et al., 2015). Geographies of ageing scholarship has been largely influenced by the ontological turn towards relational thinking and the view that places do not hold intrinsically healing or therapeutic properties, but person–place encounters are performed and fluid (Jones, 2009; Skinner et al., 2015). Supportive environments under focus have encompassed social, symbolic and physical features of spaces, that through processes of habitation and life experiences are transformed into places of meaning (Grove, 2021; Rowles, 2013). Notable examples of researched places include dwelling environments, neighbourhoods and rural communities, access to green and blue spaces, and interconnected global communities (Cutchin et al., 2003; Finlay et al., 2015; Gardner, 2011; Keating, 2008; Plane & Jurjevich, 2009).

According to this growing body of evidence, health and well-being outcomes emerging from older people–place encounters can be considered as relational in two ways (Andrews et al., 2013). First, based on the understanding that place is a node where dynamic assemblages of material, social and affective resources converge, and is in itself embedded within a multi-scalar network under the influence of sociocultural and historic events (Conradson, 2005; Duff, 2011; Foley, 2011). Second, as a personalised affective experience in which a particular place encounter triggers diverse body senses, thus, generating somatic responses and feeling states that spawn the individual's sense of identity and action potential (Andrews et al., 2013; Duff, 2011). The degree to which a place-encounter can be qualified as enabling is influenced by the power on an experience to promote health and well-being through diverse pathways, such as facilitating the development of a sense of identity and belonging (Finlay et al., 2018), modulation of emotions (Korpela & Hartig, 1996), and increased opportunities for social and/or physical activities (Bates et al., 2019; Duff, 2012).

By focusing on disruptions and shifts in place relationships, geographers can acquire nuanced understandings of how enabling places can be experienced, developed and (re)constructed through life transitions and in face of adversity (Hörschelmann, 2011; Power et al., 2019). As a global event with health, economic and social consequences, the COVID-19 pandemic has largely disrupted and redefined the functions of everyday life-spaces across many generations and cultures (Devine-Wright et al., 2020). However, we have not all been affected in the same way. The higher mortality rates and increased risk of severe illness related to COVID-19 among older people and people living with chronic health conditions lead to more stringent mobility and public health measures for these groups, such as sheltering-in-place (Promislow, 2020; WHO, 2020). For older people based in community settings, access to several supportive resources may have been curtailed and their activity spaces reduced, posing a threat to the independence and sense of agency that characterises ageing-in-place (Guzman et al., 2023; Portegijs et al., 2021). However, enabling resources may have also emerged, as people developed adaptive strategies and developed new routines.

Although evidence highlighting the role of particular places during the pandemic is emerging (Bustamante et al., 2022; Foley et al., 2022; Jellard & Bell, 2021), it is unknown how the pandemic may have altered enabling places from the perspective of people ageing-in-place, and how affective ties to place may have shifted during the pandemic. To fill this gap, this paper utilises a qualitative approach to characterise enabling places according to the experiences of older community dwellers based in Ireland during COVID-19. We consider that findings from this study provide relevant insights to harness the potential benefits of place and advance efforts to understand how enabling resources may be generated and maintained.

2 | METHODS

2.1 | Study design and context

Data for this research were collected as part of a larger study utilising an exploratory qualitative approach (Green & Thorogood, 2018) to understand the mechanisms underlying mental health and well-being outcomes of older people during the COVID-19 pandemic. A protocol providing an overview of the overall study has been published elsewhere (Guzman et al., 2021b). Briefly, following a convenient sampling approach, people aged 65 years and over who were living in community settings across Ireland were invited to share their experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic following a multi-method approach. Narrative interviews ($n = 44$) and written submissions ($n = 17$) were collected between

March and early May 2021, while go-along interviews ($n = 5$) were conducted between October and November 2021. Table 1 provides a few examples to contextualise and illustrate the public health restrictions in Ireland at this time.

2.2 | Public-patient involvement (PPI)

A PPI panel composed by five community dwellers based in Ireland and aged over 65 contributed to the study as research advisors and co-researchers. Further details of the PPI contributions have been published elsewhere (Guzman et al., 2021a).

2.3 | Data analysis

Interview transcripts, written submissions, images and fieldnotes were imported and organised in NVivo12. We applied Braun and Clarke's (2021) steps for reflexive thematic analysis. The first author familiarised with the data during data collection, transcription and repeated reading of transcripts and fieldnotes. Three members of the PPI panel familiarised with a subsample of transcripts identified initial codes and discussed preliminary themes. Preliminary codes and interpretations were then discussed with other members of the research team. The lead author then applied the codes to the remaining data, refined and named the final themes. Methodological rigour was enhanced through multiple strategies, including peer debriefing, negative case analysis, and clear audit trails (Marshall & Rossman, 2016).

3 | FINDINGS

> Q: 'Where have you felt most comfortable during the pandemic?'
>
> A: 'Where? Let's see … somewhere old, somewhere new, somewhere green' (Gerald, 86 years).

The mean age of participants was 74.9 (SD = 7; range 65–96), 53% were female, 46% lived alone, and 86% lived in areas with high urban influence (Central Statistics Office (CSO), 2019). Table 2 shows further details of participants' sociodemographic characteristics. Public health restrictions curtailed participants' usual activities and influenced how they related to their homes, workplaces and a variety of public spaces where they had previously pursued valued activities. Across the myriad of places mentioned, most participants touched upon the significance of 'old' familiar environments, such as dwelling spaces and neighbourhoods; 'new' aspects of place discovered in 'old' familiar environments and/or the development of 'brand-new' relationships with place; and connections with 'green' and other colour palettes of nature

TABLE 1 Illustrative COVID-19 public health measures in Ireland[a].

Date	Key measures
27 March 2020	Restrictions of movement were implemented for the general population to remain within a 2 km catchment area from their home and only engage in essential travel
	Cocooning recommendations were issued for people ≥70 years to not leave their homes and to minimize all interactions with others
5 May 2020	Those advised to cocoon could go outside their homes for a short exercise or drive up to 5 km from their home but should avoid all face-to-face contact with others
8 June 2020	Reopening of the economy and society commenced. Individuals cocooning or medically vulnerable were allowed a small number of visitors
29 June 2020	All domestic travel restrictions were lifted. Third places (i.e., gyms, cinemas, leisure facilities, hairdressers, restaurants, etc.) were allowed to open with social distancing
January–February 2021	Introduction of vaccination programmes for older people
1 May 2021	Government issued recommendation for over 70s to exercise personal judgement regarding engagement with others and in activities outside their homes

[a]Resources: (Health Service Executive (HSE), 2020; World Health Organization, 2021).

TABLE 2 Participants' socio-demographic characteristics (*n* = 57).

Characteristic	Mean	SD
Age	74.9	7
	N	%
Gender		
Female	30	53
Male	25	44
Non-binary	2	4
Ethnic/cultural background		
White Irish	50	88
White Irish Traveller	2	4
Other (including mixed backgrounds)	5	9
Employment status		
Employed	7	12
Retired	46	81
Other	4	7
Living arrangements		
Living alone	26	46
Living with others	31	54
Dwelling type		
House	51	89
Flat/apartment	5	9
Sheltered accommodation	1	2
Level of urbanisation in residential area[a]		
Urban (cities, towns, rural areas with high urban influence)	49	86
Rural areas with low urban influence and remote areas	8	14
Self-reported diagnosis of chronic disease(s)		
Yes	35	61
No	22	39
Self-reported mobility impairment(s)		
Yes	9	16
No	48	84

[a]Based on the Central Statistics Office urban/rural categorisation.

to cope with pandemic effects. As such, our findings provide descriptions and illustrative quotes across three themes: (1) somewhere old relates to emplacement in familiar places and the role of familiarity with place resources; (2) somewhere new comprises the emergence of digital spaces and possible pathways to build place insideness; and (3) somewhere green describes the negotiation and (re)turn to natural and outdoor environments during COVID-19. Participants' names have been changed for pseudonyms and are followed by their age at time of data collection, gender (F = female; M = male; NB = non-binary), living arrangements (LA = living alone; LwO = living with others), and level of urbanisation in residential area (U = high urban influence; R = low urban influence).

3.1 | Somewhere old: Emplacement in familiar places and the role of familiarity with place resources

Participants reported that staying within home boundaries meant they were separated from non-proximate places of meaning, but also found themselves within a familiar environment where they could exert some semblance of control over being exposed to the virus. For instance, Grainne (74/F/LwO/U) shared:

We were being told we had to stay in. At least that was a certainty, you were at home, so you were restricted, you were sort of constrained. But you knew what the limits, what the boundaries were, and then you had to do everything you could within these boundaries.

Participants' affective responses to home emplacement were diverse and included negative emotions such as fear, anxiety, uncertainty, grief, boredom and entrapment, but also respite from other life pressures and opportunities to (re)focus on some valued activities. A good fit between participants' living arrangements and their needs and preferences contributed to a sense of home as a place of refuge, while undesirable dwelling characteristics led to feeling 'stuck-in-place' (Lawton & Nahemow, 1973; Torres-Gil & Hofland, 2012). Additionally, participants such as Siobhan (72/F/LA/R) reflected on newfound perspectives of familiar spaces due to the increased time spent in them:

I had been thinking that my house was too big for me, and I was thinking I should move to a smaller house and get rid of half my things. But I realised being here for so long, that it makes such a difference to have space, and have lots of wonderful books around. I really appreciate that I haven't moved, and it's encouraged me to feel that if I'm still here for a good few years it's not going to be so bad. This has been a dress rehearsal for when I get older and have to spend more time at home.

With the relaxation of cocooning recommendations, benefits of familiarity with physical environments expanded to public places including grocery shops and pharmacies, parks and neighbourhood walks, and interconnecting mobility networks. For Cathy (73/F/LwO/U) this familiarity provided reassurance to stop cocooning, to which she added: 'You can work around it if you're sensible, you know what the rules are, and you know your area. Then it's in your own hands, you can work out a way of getting around'.

Physical insideness was also used to plan routines that minimised the risk of viral exposure based on the knowledge of when places might be less crowded and how to move within. For instance, according to the placement of products of interest in shops, which Orla (71/F/LwO/U) illustrated:

I just put on my mask, and I go around this shop where I know where they have the things I need. I have a list and I fly around the shop and grab the things ... then wave my magic card at the magic machine and leg it out the door.Similarly, Anne (73/F/LwO/U), who experienced health challenges during the pandemic, detailed how she utilised physical awareness of her neighbourhood's mobility networks to get from one place to another safely while maintaining physical distance from others:

My feeling is sometimes other people do step aside, but they don't always, so I prefer to be safe and walk through where I know there's plenty of gateways or something I can step into.

Additionally, being well acquainted with local characteristics made it easier to 'find places to wander, especially places where nobody else would be wandering' (Paddy/72/M/LA/R). Although in several narratives other people were often equated with risk, participants also referred to the benefits of social insideness and established community networks. For instance, Robert (72/M/LA/U) who lived in a Georgian house divided into several apartments described:

I've been living here now for almost eight years, and we're all quite friendly. My neighbours directly above me did my shopping for me, and other neighbours provided meals and offered that if I needed to go somewhere they would take me, so I didn't have to drive. So, I didn't have any practical difficulties, that made a big difference.

3.2 | Somewhere new: Emergence of digital spaces and possible pathways to build place insideness

In response to the restrictions, opportunities emerged for participants to encounter new facets and positive emotions within familiar environments, but also to develop meaningful relationships with previously unfamiliar places. Activities in digital spaces experienced a sharp, significant growth—where before digital interactions had been absent or played a minimal role in participants' lives, for many they were now 'literally a lifeline' (Carlin/66/NB/LA/U). The digital outburst

was facilitated by community organisations adapting activities online and loved ones seeking to stay connected. For instance, Thomas (69/M/LwO/U) spoke about feelings of loss due to the curtailment of family meetings and not being a part of his grandchildren's milestones until 'all of us learned how to get on Zoom and we all got great practice', which led to new routines and positive feeling states:

> Most Sunday evenings we would have a family Zoom call, everybody, grandchildren as well, the whole lot. Oftentimes for an hour or maybe two, maybe even more ... So, that's been entertaining and fun, and we're probably even closer now.

Additionally, participants engaged with digital spaces to obtain updates and information regarding COVID-19; satisfy practical needs (e.g., online shopping; remote medical care); and engage in hobbies and other recreation activities at a safe physical distance (e.g., continued learning, online games). For participants, such as Bridie (74/F/LwO/U), who continued to stay at home even after the relaxation of restrictions due to her health conditions, an important aspect of these digital encounters was the opportunity to have an immersive experience that included interaction with others:

> I now play bridge online, and I mean, before COVID that was kind of a silent show, if you like, because you'd never see the people or anything like that. But now you can do it on Zoom. That's magic. You can chat and you can just see as if we were at the table. You know, people are having a cup of tea and having a chat. They're there fully, which is, oh, I couldn't say enough about it.

However, the move to digital platforms was not enthusiastically received by everyone. Barriers for participation included low digital competency, no access to digital devices, absent or poor internet connection, fear of becoming a scam target, poor translation of activities to online settings, and fear of losing anonymity/confidentiality. For some participants, such as Margaret (73/F/LA/U), initial apprehensions receded as the collective turn towards digital activities provided opportunities 'to give it a try' and to develop social insideness:

> At the beginning even the word 'Zoom' kind of frightened me ... The first time going into the breakout rooms I thought I was going on a flight to Mars, but then it happened and it was nothing like that, you know, it was just a very soft landing from the big room into a smaller group with some of the same people. So, it became a pleasant thing to look forward to, and a good way to keep in touch with reality when we weren't allowed to leave our house.

Training sessions provided in a supportive and accessible manner were an additional enabler to take part in digital spaces. For instance, Mary (71/F/LwO/U) shared:

> I did the Age-Action [*training*] and they sent us a little booklet, you know, with all this Twitter and everything explained in quite a nice and simple way, like, for older people. Because there's no good talking to me about gigabytes or megabytes ... You have to keep it simple, you know, because people at our age, we didn't grow up with it. So, we might not get it right away, like, but I feel I've improved a good bit now.

Similarly, Seamus (92/M/LA/U) reported he had received 'a little tug from seeing friends my own age were doing it and enjoying it', which highlights the potential for similarly aged peers to act as role models or teachers when stepping into unfamiliar spaces.

3.3 | Somewhere green: Negotiation and (re)turn to natural environments and outdoor spaces

Participants referred to a new/renewed appreciation for nature and outdoor encounters. These occurred at multiple scales ranging from household gardens and indoor potted plants to local beaches and national parks. Participants viewed interactions with nature as an opportunity for human and non-human interactions involving other people, vegetation and wildlife. In addition to social connections, a wide variety of activities were undertaken in natural settings, some of which were passive, such as reading and contemplation, while others involved physical exertion through gardening or

hiking. Significantly, from the participants' perspective, natural environments provided distinctive benefits to other outdoor environments. In this regard, Sarah (73/F/LwO/U) shared:

> You can always walk someplace in and out between houses. But it's actually refreshing to just leave your own neighbourhood completely and have a new vista and a new sort of nature.

Natural landscapes provided opportunities to escape COVID-19-related stressors, such as an overabundance of information, feelings of cabin fever and worries about the future. Some participants ascribed the relevance of these encounters to personal affinity with nature; however, others referred to a unique opportunity for these encounters to occur during the pandemic due to a halt of other activities and a social turn towards nature as an acceptable coping mechanism. Niall (87/M/LwO/R) detailed:

> I found that I became more contemplative, as in I was seeing beauty in nature and nature was talking with me. I think I found that because the variety in my life, like meeting people and travelling to Dublin—that was gone. So, I found that I became more attuned to nature and to what was happening in nature ... So that sort of stuff was a huge personal exploration for me, and I found it very satisfying, and at times deeply moving.

Aside from the perceived positive influences of nature, the collective turn towards outdoor settings highlighted their limited availability and led to conflict between users. For instance, Katherine (73/F/LA/U) reported:

> I love nature, love the sea, love mountains, you know, everything to do with nature. I like to go somewhere where it's pretty, and that's attractive because you can see something or you can also see people, or even be completely on your own, that can be nice too. But now you also need somewhere safe. There was too many people. Nobody, or very few people are keeping the two metres.

Similarly, participants living near natural environments and/or those who had incorporated activities in them as part of their routines found that they had to adapt new strategies particularly on 'days of heavy traffic such as weekends', with some of them even choosing to withdraw from them completely. Ciara (72/F/LwO/U), who lives near a popular swimming spot, shared her own experience:

> It's been chaos there, I wouldn't dream of going to walk down around the beach now because there's too many people, and also streaming away from [there] on the longer front. Sometimes I used to go down and read the paper a little bit, just beyond the bath. A lot of elderly, even older than I am, would go there with their newspaper and they sit in their car and they look at the sea ... That's all gone for people around here, you know. It's much more difficult for people like that to fill their day.

Ciara's account underscores the need for additional spaces that facilitate access to nature and that such environments should be enabling for a wide group of users with diverse preferences, needs and capabilities.

4 | DISCUSSION

Our findings illustrate older people's perspectives of their homes and neighbourhoods during COVID-19, as well as their experiences with digital and green spaces. Although these settings do not represent a comprehensive account of all significant places during the pandemic, we consider that findings provide relevant insights to advance the characterisation of enabling places (Bell et al., 2018; Duff, 2011). In this sense, our results are as much about residential, digital and green spaces, as they are about the processes underlying enabling encounters, such as the role of familiarity with place resources; factors enabling the development of new place relationships; and the effects of collective social turns towards specific landscapes.

Findings regarding the role of familiarity with home and neighbourhood's place resources during COVID-19 indicate that physical and social insideness contribute to 'ontological security', which provides a sense of reliability over time, and translates into opportunities to carry on daily activities and to some degree anticipate the future (Giddens, 1991; Rowles, 1983). However, results illustrate that the familiar can swiftly or gradually become unfamiliar and vice versa,

which exposes place-insideness as a consistently precarious and negotiated endeavour (Finlay et al., 2018). Accordingly, our findings reinforce the notion of places as relational and showcase how the dynamic in-flux of material, social and affective place resources pushes individuals towards a constant (re)negotiation of health and well-being (Duff, 2011; Power et al., 2019). While in later life these processes are intertwined with negotiations of 'ageing-as-well-as-you-can' in place (Grove, 2021).

Central to this discussion is the consideration of place encounters as an embodied and affective experience (Davidson & Milligan, 2004). An example of this can be observed in how participants co-created and transformed digital spaces into places embedded with meaning when appropriate material and social resources were available (Duff, 2011; Phillips, 2013). To succeed in doing so, participants' bodies were required to learn 'how to do it', both in the practical sense of navigating digital technologies, but also in learning how to move and communicate with others through a screen (Longhurst, 2018). These findings suggest that digital spaces reproduce individuals' identities, needs and desires, and contest the notion that the body is 'left behind' and 'irrelevant' in all digital endeavours (Kitchin, 1998; Parr, 2002), while also framing this idea for the first time within a cohort of older people.

Findings in our last theme contribute to the evidence base of why/how multiple scales of nature may enable health and well-being during the pandemic (Bustamante et al., 2022; Doughty et al., 2022). The pathways identified include restitution of disrupted senses of identity and agency, as well as opportunities to access diverse social, material and affective resources (Finlay et al., 2015). However, the results suggest that the increase of people seeking respite and comfort in natural landscapes at the same time created conflict between users and completely blocked access for some older people (Bustamante et al., 2022). This calls to attention the need to leverage communities' access to natural spaces and to co-develop accessible green infrastructure together with older people.

Given that our results indicate that heterogeneous affective states may emerge across the older population as a response to shifts in place's identity and resources during a public health crisis, we consider that this study contributes to a geographical body of work that highlights differences between individuals as well as commonalities. We propose that capturing this relational nature of place based on the conceptual model of enabling places (Duff, 2011) provides a unique opportunity for geographers, public health professionals and urban planners to characterise and develop public spaces as enabling environments that can truly cater for people with diverse needs and preferences (Gurney et al., 2017). We posit that building on this study's findings, future geographies of ageing research could explore if the enabling resources and pathways identified continue to provide therapeutic benefits for older people as we emerge from COVID-19, and what differences are observed across other populations and contexts.

5 | CONCLUSION

Our findings highlight characteristics of enabling places from the perspective of people ageing-in-place in Ireland during the COVID-19 pandemic. The results indicate a wide array of affective experiences related to place and suggest how enabling places for people with diverse needs and preferences may be conceptualised and developed. A pressing challenge remains to advance enabling places in a proactive and not reactive way, and to incorporate in their development the voices of people with heterogeneous perspectives.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT
Due to ethical concerns and the sensitive nature of the data these are not available to the public.

ETHICS STATEMENT

Ethical approval for the project was received from the Royal College of Surgeons in Ireland Research Ethics Committee (REC202011028). All participants provided written informed consent before participation.

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