SILVER CITIES

INITIAL POSITION PAPER

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The 'Silver Cities' project has in part grown out of 'The Richness of Cities' initiative, a collection of Working Papers on urban policy commissioned and edited by Comedia and Demos between October 1997 and January 1999, culminating in a Final Report published in May 1999. Many of these Working Papers concentrated on policy areas connected either with services and infrastructure - such as housing, governance and lifelong learning - or with the challenges and economic opportunities offered by IT and the growing environmental sector. None dealt specifically with demographic change, though many alluded to its significance.

In the 'Silver Cities' study it is intended to address this issue directly, by looking at the important role which the growing population of older people - notably the over-50s – have to play in the future well-being of towns and cities in the UK: through their lifestyles, consumer spending power, skills, talents and interests, as well as in their needs for healthcare, social services and mobility. In this growing population there will be an increasing number of ethnic minority older people, for whom city life offers a more established sense of safety and security.

The original 'Richness of Cities' study was primarily concerned with the long-term economic success and sustainability of urban centres, threatened by the continuing drift of residential populations to the suburbs and rural areas, a trend frequently known as 'counter-urbanisation', and common elsewhere in Europe and North America. In the debate about the dangers posed by this seemingly inexorable drift, the potential contribution which young, affluent, and often childless people might make to renewed urban vitality seemed to be over-emphasised – as well as possibly representing a short-term phenomenon – compared with the wider economic and social opportunities the retention of older people in urban centres offered. This is the focus of this paper, and of the study.

The Urban Task Force report, ***Towards an Urban Renaissance*** (1999), identified the following three powerful 'drivers of change which will affect the future of urban areas' :

- the technical revolution;
- the ecological threat;
- the social transformation.

Within the latter category it identified 'increasing life expectancy' as one of the key elements of the expected social transformation of urban life in Britain, yet never referred substantively to the subject again. While the report contains much original and innovative thinking, especially about planning, transport, architecture, design and place-making, it is weakest when tackling the demographic (and social) nature of urban trends and lifestyles, particularly in a market society where it is the demographic and social imbalances which are likeliest to be further accentuated by economic *laisser-faire*.

One trend noted by the Urban Task Force report, and again by the Urban White Paper, ***Our Towns & Cities: The Future, Delivering an Urban Renaissance*** (2000), is the growth of single-person households, where it is estimated that by 2021, 35% of all households will consists of people living alone, a figure which includes many older people. Of the estimated 3.8 million new households needing to be accommodated by 2021, the White Paper asserts that 70% will be single person households. Therefore issues of design, adaptability, location and ownership of these new households and settlements are likely to be crucial, though it is

not apparent at present how advanced thinking is, apart from the government's commitment to a new generation of 'urban villages'.

It is assumed, though not proven, that the majority of people currently leaving cities are families with younger children, looking for modern homes in greenfield developments, with access to good schools, and safer environments, invariably in the form of a car-intensive and car-dependent lifestyle. This loss of population has affected city-centre and inner city areas most, leaving many of them with a business, civic and retailing heartland, but little residential population close by. The drive to re-populate city centres in the name of urban renewal has been best documented in Manchester, where, as the Urban White Paper notes,

> 'In Central Manchester it is estimated that the residential population has grown from 300 in 1998 to 6000 in 2000. These incomers are mainly single or couples without children. They are often in professional occupations and include students.'

The re-population of urban centres is most likely to be made up of young professionals in the foreseeable future, whose housing, transport and amenity needs are somewhat different from the wider society as a whole. Yet these might well fit more comfortably with the needs of older people too. In fact there might be some important 'elective affinities' between older people and younger people without children, in their relatively higher amounts of disposable income and available time for leisure activities. Similarly both groups might be in a better position to benefit from new kinds of urban design, innovative new residential development or architectural adaptation, where flexibility and adaptability of space, along with a greater potential interest in the provision of common services – fitness rooms, laundries, concierge schemes, intranet schemes, supermarket delivery services, organic produce 'box' schemes – is greater.

In the following section we briefly outline some of the themes which will be studied in the 'Silver Cities' project.

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1 LIFETIME CITIES
In the great policy debate about stemming the urban exodus and creating an urban renaissance, little has been said about the contribution to be made by the over-50s. We need 'lifetime cities'. In the 'Silver Cities' study it is intended to describe conditions and opportunities in the UK's free-standing cities with populations of more than 150, 000, such as Bristol, Cardiff, Nottingham, Manchester, particularly since so much urban debate is focused on London. Lifetime cities will seek to retain older people, by offering services and a quality of life that may not be possible in suburban or other lower-density settings. The 'lifetime city' may look and feel different to cities as we currently know them, with different rhythms, networks and geographies. In Peter Ackroyd's recent 'biography' of London, he commented that what gave the capital its energy and frenetic pace in the 17th century was the sheer demographic fact that the vast majority of its inhabitants were under 30, as a result of the short life expectancy of the time. The demographic make-up of a city is bound to exert an enormous impact upon its everyday life, pace and culture. This factor has been too frequently over-looked by urbanists, architects and planners.

2   ACTIVISTS NOT VICTIMS
Chronological age and physical ability are not necessarily correlated. Older people are not uniquely marginalised, as they share with many other people - the disabled, the unemployed, the physically insecure and sexually vulnerable - many forms of 'otherness' in the city.   Many older people lead active and fulfilling lives, and make a major contribution to civil society through their engagement with voluntary and political life. Older people are probably over-represented in local government and voluntary networks. It is important to bring to bear the widest, most inclusive sense of the potentiality of older people to the study, not a reductive sense of incapacity or negative capability. At the same time, the study will recognise the problems facing those older people who do feel silenced, invisible and powerless.

3   OPPORTUNITIES TO WORK AND CONTRIBUTE
There is an invaluable economic and social role to be played by older people in a more labour-intensive, public service culture, where society as a whole may benefit from more caretakers, concierges, parks wardens, childcare workers, school cooks and classroom assistants.   Such attitudes directly challenge the 'labour-saving' mentality of recent political cultures, where quality and wider social cohesion has been sacrificed on the altar of short-term price competitiveness. Older people represent rich social and intellectual capital, not to be squandered. The study will be looking at the value of experience, wisdom and social commitment, as well as concepts such as the 'time economy' and other new economies based on mutuality, and other exchanges of services.

4   PENSIONS, POVERTY AND THE ILLUSION OF CHOICE
It is important to pay attention both to the growing wealth and disposable income of many older people, and to the deeply entrenched poverty which still blights the lives of a significant section of the older population, especially perhaps those belonging to ethnic minority groups.   Older people are growing increasingly politically militant on issues such as pensions, benefits and the funding and provision of long term care. These issues need to be re-considered so as to maximise facilities and quality, not drive down standards by cost-cutting.

5   THE MIXED ECONOMY OF CARE
It is vital also to remember that the majority of care and caring labour in society is still done free by family and friends. We need to move beyond the divide which institutionalises and sharply separates the world of free care and that of total state dependency (in the same way that society and government needs to be more flexible about the need and ability of people to both work and claim appropriate benefits if it gives them a better quality of life beyond the poverty trap). More flexible economies and more flexible models of paying for caring need to be considered. The study will also acknowledge the growth of many forms of physical and mental therapy, counselling and the alternative health economy and culture, in which increasing numbers of older people benefit as participants. Particular attention will need to be paid to issues of cultural difference and ethnic identity, especially where this is associated with the provision of amenities and care.

6   NEW MODELS OF URBAN DESIGN AND PLANNING
In terms of urban design, if you plan and design for the pedestrian, or for the disabled person, or the most vulnerable, automatically almost everybody else benefits. The walkable city is the most economically vital city. Yet all the pressures for amenity and

facility are towards centralization: car-dependent supermarkets, big central libraries and leisure facilities, monolithic hospitals serving enormous geographical areas but not in easy reach of public transport, or vast new cemeteries out in the suburbs. The changing demographic make-up of the city presents a challenge to urban design and planning to re-localise services and amenities, and revitalise the public realm.

7   NEW ARCHITECTURAL AND DESIGN MODELS FOR LIVING, SHELTER AND HABITAT
The changing demographic make-up of the modern city offers opportunities for inter-generational links, greater diversity of residential and cultural lifestyles, more choice for older people apart from seaside retirement, or old people's homes. Yet we need to ask whether in the UK we are heading more towards a North American model of urban enclaving which make age, wealth and lifestyle the basis for community, or towards a more European tradition of the socially and demographically mixed urban district? There are some difficult trade-offs to be negotiated between the desire of many older people for a degree of withdrawal from the hurly-burly of modern life, set against the increased isolation and neglect that this can also bring.

Architecture, product, furniture and interior design for older people has traditionally had a condescending approach, focusing on physical aids, basic colours, practicality and little concern for aesthetic issues. Living spaces have usually been designed based on models of the nuclear family minus children. But as new generations of people grow older, they may want to make different choices - such as mobile homes, communal or shared dwellings, part-time residences (eg spending half the year elsewhere), as well as wanting to see their products and living spaces as contributing to the quality of their life experience and not purely in terms of practicality. Designing for older people should recognise their potential role as pioneers of different lifestyles which may also come to be chosen by others - irrespective of age.

8   FLEXIBILITY OF SPEED AND TIME
Crudely, the modern city is operates at two speeds, exemplified in the hectic time economy of the car-dependent, mobile phone accessible, dead-lined and date-lined business executive, compared with the non-employed person, male or female, young or old, who spends much time waiting for buses, shopping locally, waiting at pedestrian crossings, or queuing at the post-office. There is much to be learned from the increasing use of 'time-planning' processes in other European cities, balancing the rhythms of the city with the rhythms of amenity.

9   BENEFITS OF THE WIRED CITY
Many older people have shown themselves adept in the new technology, and find its educational and informational richness a valuable addition to their lives. This study will look at current projects and areas of good practice where the use of ICT is enabling older people both to benefit from the ease and home-based entrypoint of such technologies , and to the contribution they can make to the wider economy and culture through its deployment. From updated 'real-time' public transport timetables through to email connections linking individuals and communities in joint learning projects, older people represent a vital constituency for the new media that may in fact be in the vanguard of new innovations both in form and content.

10. LEARNING TO LIVE WITH MORTALITY
   One reason why older people are sometimes ostracised or rendered invisible within mainstream culture is that they represent a reminder of human mortality, which in many areas of life has been abolished to the margins of experience. The recent Parliamentary Select Committee on Cemeteries (Environment, Transport and Regional Affairs, March 2001) noted with some anger the shocking way many English towns and cities have allowed cemeteries to fall into disrepair and neglect, even ones which are still used for burial. Yet the cemetery has always been a central part of urban life, and the creation of new forms of memorialisation in the city, and greater respect for the customs and rituals of bereavement and death, can only help re-establish the city as a place which fully marks the progress of life as much as the historic village.

These are currently the principal themes which are to be studied in the year ahead. Comments on this initial position paper are welcome.