

**Impact of Image
designers and ageism
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In 2009 a producer on the PBS show Life Part 2 filmed a segment on an empathy/aging suit that I had developed.¹ This suit simulates the various physical changes associated with aging and was used as a way for my design students to gain a better understanding of the physical issues associated with aging (figure 1). The producer put on the suit, and after I adjusted the suit to the worst possible restriction, I asked him how he felt? He replied, "I feel horrible!" It was then that I realized that I had developed a tool that did not elicit empathy and a better understanding of aging but confirmed all of the fears and stereotypes we have about getting old – ending up hunched over, shuffling and in pain. I had unwittingly developed an 'ageist suit'!



Figure 1: aging suit

Ageism is a term coined by recently deceased gerontologist Robert N. Butler in 1969. He stated: "Ageism reflects a deep seated uneasiness on the part of the young and middle-aged - a personal revulsion to and distaste for growing old, disease, disability; and a fear of powerlessness, 'uselessness', and death".

² Yale University psychologist Rebecca R. Levy maintains that ageism is the most entrenched "ism" of all and even worse than racism or sexism.³ Ongoing research at Harvard, University of Virginia and University of Washington with a program called Project Implicit found that the largest prejudicial bias people had was not towards people of different race, or sex but towards the elderly⁴.

Our perception of old age is colored by an ageist narrative of what we expect (and fear) will happen when we age. As a designer, the question becomes to what extent does the look and type of products and environments used by our seniors influence, positively or negatively, our view of them as well as their view of themselves? In health care designers Gretchen Anderson's view, if we see seniors through the products that are available to them then they would be seen as 'cranky, stupid, and tacky'⁵. Today, when I do workshops with design students and professionals using the aging/empathy suit, I still enviously adjust the suit to the severest aging restrictions that hunches the wearer over and makes them as uncomfortable as possible. But instead of this activity and image being the ending point of the workshop on aging it becomes the starting point for the more important discussion and exploration of ageism in our society and its reflection in design.

This paper is not about whether designers exhibit more or less ageist attitudes than other professions. What this paper is about is an exploration of ageism in our culture, of ageism in design and what designers can do to address ageism. The first section of the paper will be about the perception and reality of aging, and how design is influenced by and reinforces ageism. The second part of the paper proposes a ten-point plan for a reduction of ageism in design with examples of some design education methods and strategies to support the plan.

Ageism: the power of negative thinking

When we see people we automatically categorize each individual along three dimensions: race, gender, and age⁶. Cognitive psychologists say that we naturally stereotype and that it is in our nature to categorize other people as "buckets". These buckets are a collection of traits, physical features, expectations and values⁷. We take these cognitive short cuts because it helps us organize complex information that confronts us on a daily basis. These generalizations then

become our stereotypes of that individual or that group of people. So when traffic signs are put up representing older people in the area and show a silhouetted graphic of a man and woman bent over using a cane, this image confirms and reinforces our expectations of aging (figure 2). The problem with generalizations and perceptions is that they may be based on wrong assumptions, prejudices and stereotypes and may be resistant to change. The problem with ageism is it is so widespread and it is one of the least addressed and challenged prejudices in our community.⁸ Although, as our population ages, ageism is now coming under the same scrutiny as the other 'isms'. There is an ongoing campaign in England to have those 'elderly crossing' traffic signs removed because they are deemed ageist and do not reflect the reality and diversity of an older population⁹.



Figure 2: traffic sign

The Stereotype Content Model (SCM) provides some interesting insight into the stereotypes we have of our aged population. This model looks at two dimensions – warmth and competency which research suggest plays a critical role in stereotyping and prejudice. Findings show that elderly people were consistently rated in the high warmth low competence cluster. So on one hand on one hand, people will stereotype elderly people as warm (positive stereotype), but on the other hand they will view them as incompetent (negative stereotype). In fact, the more incompetent the elderly are perceived then the warmer they become and conversely the more competent they are perceived, the less warm they are¹⁰. Research now shows that this “doddering but dear” low competence/high warmth stereotype is now pan-cultural and both individualistic cultures found in western societies and predominately Asian collectivist cultures all exhibited ageism stereotypes.¹¹ Interestingly, the high warmth, low competency cluster also included the disabled and the mentally handicapped. Groups associated with this cluster are consistently responded to with pity.¹²

What is unusual about ageism is that it will impact all of us. We all age and Todd Nelson, editor of the book *Ageism: Stereotyping and Prejudice against Older People*, notes that ageism is a prejudice against our ‘feared future self’.¹³ Yale researcher Rebecca Levy says that many people start developing stereotypes about older people during childhood, reinforce them throughout adulthood, and then enter old age with attitudes toward their own age group as negative as the younger people’s attitudes about them.¹⁴ Her research now suggests that holding on to ageism attitudes is bad for everyone’s health including those who hold ageist views. Levy has explored how negative self-perceptions and self-images related to aging are directly related to poor health outcomes. She has also shown that positive self-perceptions of aging can improve memory, thinking and cognition, mood, self-confidence, overall functionality, and longevity.¹⁵

As Levy’s research shows the power of positive thinking is very powerful, yet age positive design images are few and far between in our culture and ageist attitudes skews our understanding of that part of the life span. For designers, understanding how ageist stereotypes can be incorporated into products is essential before responding to the needs of an aging population whose growing numbers will be unprecedented in human history.

While prejudices on race (racism) and gender (sexism) have received a lot of attention, researchers have paid comparatively little attention to prejudice based on age (ageism)¹⁶. Nelson conducted a data base search a few years ago and found that search for “racism” and “sexism” yielded ten and five times more documents than a search for “ageism” produced.¹⁷ In design, other than designer and gerontologist Patricia Moore’s seminal research when she spent three years (1979-1982), disguised as an elderly woman probing ageist attitudes there is almost non-existent research on ageism in design.

Getting old isn't nearly as bad as people think it will be. Nor is it quite as good (Growing old in America: Expectations vs. Reality, Pew Research Foundation)

In 2009 Barbie turned fifty. Barbie, born during the peak of the baby boom, represents one of the iconic toys of the baby boom generation (1947-1967) who as they retire will start to redefine what it means to be old. In a workshop I do on ageism, I show an image off the Internet of what Barbie would look like if she was in her fifties (figure 3). Those of the baby boom generation, always thinks she looks way too old and those of the younger generation thinks she looks about right for her age. The reality of our understanding of aging depends on two things; how old we are, and the degree and type of interactions we have had with an older population. Over the years in my design classes I have asked my students what their day-to-day interactions are with older people (60 +). I have found that interactions are almost non-existent. The reality is that our aged population is largely invisible in our culture, this contributes to the misperceptions we have about this group.



Figure 3: Barbie at 50

The year Barbie turned fifty the Pew Research Foundation released its report *Growing Old in America: Expectations vs. Reality*. They report came to the conclusion that people do not have a very good understanding of what happens when we reach old age. The Pew survey found that there were considerable differences between what young and middle-aged adults expect will happen when they reach old age and what is actually experienced when old age is reached. For example, the negative associations with aging such as memory loss and illness were reported less by the older population than what the younger adults thought existed (i.e. 57% of those aged 18-64 in the survey expected memory loss while 25% of those 65 + actually reported experiencing memory loss, although memory loss did increase to 41% of those 85 and older). In every instance of the negative benchmarks surveyed, older adults report experiencing often far lower levels than what younger adults reported expecting to encounter. So if old age is not as bad as we expect, the Pew survey also found that it is not as good as we think it will be. The positive benefits of older age such as more time with family, for hobbies/interests, to do volunteer work and travel were reported being experienced but not in the numbers that younger and middle-aged adults expected it to be.

Other key findings of the survey found that there was a large discrepancy between what constitutes old age. More than half those under 30 thought old age started before 60, those middle aged thought it was 70, and those over 65 thought is started at age 74. There were a number of other age perception differences. For example, nearly two-thirds of adults' ages 18 to 29 believe that when someone "frequently forgets familiar names," that person is old. Less than half of all adults' ages 30 and older agree. What everyone did agree on was that failing health, an inability to live independently, an inability to drive, difficulty with stairs were indicators of old age. The survey also found that peoples felt age differed from their chronological age. For example, nearly half of all survey respondents ages 50 and older say they feel at least 10 years younger than their real age and over a third of those 65 to 74 say they feel 10 to 19 years younger than their age.

What the Pew research indicates is that we do not have a very good understanding of old age. Joseph Coughlin who runs the AgeLab at MIT is right when he says in the New York Times recently "The reality is such that you can't build an old man's product, because a young man won't buy it and an old man won't buy it"¹⁸ Of course old men won't buy it, because you can't build an old mans product when we have such a ageist and stereotypical view of what an old man is. The view of aging is in for a change as Barbie's large boomer demographic starts to retire.

Just as they have influenced every other social and economic indicator they will also have an impact on aging and ageism. For designers, there is a unique opportunity to help re-define positive aging for this large baby boom demographic. Walter Smith, author of *Generation Ageless*, calls them the most youth obsessed group in history and that they will always think of themselves as forever young no matter how old they get. But unlike the inanimate baby boomer Barbie, this generation will still have to address ageism and come to terms with the fact we all grow old and die. As gerontologist Robert Butler has said, “behind ageism is ‘corrosive narcissism’ and our inability to accept our fate”¹⁹.

Ageism in design

The animated movie *UP* (2009) is one of the few popular movies addressing aging. Although I enjoyed the movie, it presents a number of interesting images. The main character, Carl Fredricksen, is presented as your stereotypical ‘grumpy old man’ (figure 4). The impetus of Carl’s adventure in *UP* is his fear (and ours) of being forced to go into the Shady Oaks Retirement/Nursing Home. From a design perspective, Carl exhibits the stereotypical product narratives associated with getting old. For example, ‘old man’ fashion is represented by tweed suit, above waist pants and bow tie. Carl has an array of assisted aids in the form of hearing aids, glasses, and cane representing loss and disability. What is interesting about Carl’s cane is that he has been forced to make it work better with tennis balls. And although a vignette of Carl’s earlier life made him seem like pretty hip guy, Carl in old age is not, and we assume is content to be using these ridiculous tennis balls affixed to the bottom of his cane.



Figure 4: Carl Fredricksen

Gretchen Anderson, the healthcare designer, who said that if we view seniors through the products that are available to them, then they would be viewed as ‘cranky, stupid, and tacky’ goes on to say that when we talk about needs of seniors there is a tendency to imagine someone whose eyesight, dexterity, and hearing are so impaired that they are incapable of having an experience. She says, “It is therefore assumed that they will make do with, or perhaps even prefer, a mechanistic, bulky product that smells like a hospital.”²⁰

I think there are three main factors that are driving this ageist narrative in design. One is the healthcare/medical industry that has mostly defined the product language associated with an older population. The problem is that this industry and its products are based on atypical interactions with older adults (i.e. sick/frail seniors).²¹ The second factor is the type of products developed by this industry. This tends to be assisted aids and health monitoring devices focused on the disability or the medical control of the older adult. The last factor is the design focus of these types of products, which is driven by a healthcare establishment primarily concerned with functionality. This all results in a narrow array of products associated with the elderly. These products are not very age positive or representative of the products this group uses on a daily bases. These factors are influenced by ageism and then reflect ageism through the impact of the image of older adults using those products.

So when looking at Carl’s ‘hospital’ looking metal cane there is a design language that focuses on function and not aesthetics. There is also an assumption that elderly people like Carl are just happy to ‘make do with’ tennis balls on the bottom of their canes. The tennis ball adaptations are also an indication that the cane was not very well designed for Carl’s needs in the first place. A look at many Internet sites selling senior products reveals an array of clunky and bizarre looking

assisted aid products that have that 'smell of a hospital' about them. Looking at electronic products on these websites tend to reveal products where the common design strategy seems to be one of making buttons and controls as big as possible. Even home healthcare monitoring devices do not exhibit anywhere near the aesthetic sophistication or variety when compared to consumer electronic devices in the market today.

While ageist attitudes are extremely prevalent in all aspects of our culture, a particularly dangerous and intriguing pattern of age discrimination emerges within the health care system that has attitudes that "tend to be the same as or even worse than society in general".²² In March 2003, a study conducted by investigators at the University of Oklahoma's Reynolds Department of Geriatric Medicine and reported in the *Journal of the American Geriatrics Society* noted that; "healthcare professionals tend to believe that most older individuals are frail and dependent, and that those who are not are atypical".²³ Added to this a medical establishment where very few doctors want to focus on gerontology. In an examination of medical school programs, geriatric departments were found in only three medical schools, and of the remaining 142 schools, only around 10% mandated some course work in geriatrics.²⁴

The problem for designers is that if we only have a selected view of what constitutes products for our aged population (i.e. assisted aids), and if these products are being driven by a healthcare industry that is potentially ageist and views older adults as frail and dependent, then we run the risk of reflecting and perpetuating a negative and atypical view of aging. The reality for 78-year-old Carl Fredrickson in the movie UP is that he wouldn't necessarily be grumpy, be in a nursing home, wearing a bow tie or even using a cane – especially one with tennis balls. This is a younger person's perception of the life of an older person.

Designers' needs to do a better job of framing the language associated with aging. We know from product or design semiotics that people attribute meaning to products and interact with them accordingly. The fate of all artifacts is decided in language and we, as designers must pay attention to the names that may be used to categorize a product, the adjectives that may be attached to it, and the narratives, stories and judgments that may be told about it. By addressing ageism, designers have the power to frame more age positive narratives in their designs.

The Ten-Point Plan for Ageism Reduction in Design

So how can designers and design educators start to address ageist attitudes and develop more intergenerational connections which experts point out is the best way to reverse ageism.²⁵ By adapting Australian social scientist Valarie Braithwaite's 10-point plan for *Ageism Reduction*²⁶ I propose a 10-Point Plan for *Ageism Reduction in Design*. The following is a list of the ten points with examples of some education strategies, assignments and activities that could be used.



Figure 5: United Nations logo

1. Heighten designer's sensitivity to the stereotyping of older people.

Ways to heighten students' understanding of the stereotyping of older people is to connect ageism with other 'isms' such as racism and sexism, which they may have personal experience with. In my workshops on ageism I have groups create 'buckets' of positive and negative stereotypes. These words then become topics of discussion on what is behind these stereotypes. Other activities to heighten sensitivity involve role playing exercises such as working in pairs where one person takes the role of an elderly person and the other talks to them in the exaggerated and condescending talk known as 'elder speak'. Other exercises involve identification, assessment and critiques of current ageist media images and design examples.

2. Creating greater exposure to the diversity older people.

To develop a better understanding that older people are not a homogenous group and there is huge difference in the life course between someone who is 65 and someone who is 85, I have students profile the various ages in that group. A very effective way to get design students to gain a better understanding of the diversity and personal characteristics of older people is to connect them to lives of their Grandparents – which are one of the only active relationships students may have with an older person. Students profiled their grandparents by documenting activities, hobbies, support networks and health issues. This helps create a survey of the wide variety of older experiences. These 'Grandparent Profiles' become a tool to explore diversity by having students do further demographic segmentation based on age ("young-old" 65–74, middle-old 75–84, and oldest-old 85+), life-cycle stage, gender, income, social class, and lifestyle.

3. Making deliberate use of perspective taking to see the older person as an individual.

Perspective taking involves trying to see things through the eyes of that person. In workshops on ageism I show participants various images of older people and have them comment on what they are thinking in these images. In assignments I have my design students do, it involves documenting a 'Day in the Life' of an older person (their grandparents) or undertaking home assessment where they interview and document all usability issues relating to an older person's daily activities (i.e., dressing, bathing, meal preparation, cleaning, communications, and taking medicines).

4. Greater commitment to recognizing the diversity of products used by older people.

As mentioned we have a very narrow view of what constitutes 'senior products'. I have found that the activities associated with perspective taking will start to highlight the diversity of products that are used and needed by an older person. For example, when I had my students do grandparent profiles, the recreation/hobby activity of bird watching kept coming up in the profiles. Research then showed that birding was one of the fastest growing recreation activities driven by the aging population. In other profiles the issue of seniors and pet ownership was identified. Research then showed that seniors who have pets are way healthier than those that don't. Products associated with bird watching and pet care became unique areas for student product design explorations for that age group.

5. Seeking out opportunities for intergenerational design cooperation

Communities provide ample opportunities for intergenerational cooperation and co design experiences. For example, I had students work with older adults from a seniors drop in center and children from an elementary school in designing an intergenerational space. This funded and eventual student design built space became an environment where the seniors could better run their "Grandfriends" program with the elementary school students. Seeking out opportunities with senior led groups is more beneficial for intergenerational cooperation than with health-care institutions that provide for seniors. The problem with institution led (i.e. hospitals and nursing homes) interactions is that the design cooperation tends to be with the institution and not the seniors.

For some interesting programs on successful intergeneration cooperation in other professions see the work of National Institute of Aging with their Vital Visionaries programs. These programs encourage interaction between healthcare professionals and older adults with the goal of generating improved understanding and appreciation of elders by medical/healthcare students, and to make elders more aware of their creative abilities. For example, working with Baltimore's American Visionary Art Museum and Johns Hopkins School of Medicine, the program brought together older adults and first-year medical students to work on creative projects for four two-hour sessions.²⁷

6. Promote the social attractiveness of older people through attractive design

'Cranky, stupid and tacky' products just reinforce the negative stereotypes of older people. Designers need to understand and help their clients understand the benefits of age positive design.

7. Strengthening educational practices that promote empathy

Empathy is the capacity to recognize and share some of the feelings experienced by someone else. In design there are various user and human centered design techniques that help promote empathy. Anecdotal evidence from my classes suggests that the in-home visual documentation and story telling of individual's lives and experiences (i.e. home assessments, day in the life assignments) created stronger social connections, understanding and empathy. The use of empathy/aging suits in which students design their own or 'suits' to physically simulate what the person is feeling is a very worthwhile exercise. Even though, as mentioned in the beginning of this paper, wearing or designing an aging suit can be ageist, this is balanced by the experience of trying to feel what other people are physically feeling. I have observed very powerful student discussions on trying to understand and design what osteoarthritis or Parkinson's would feel like.

8. Design for growth and independence/interdependence instead of degeneration and dependency.

Ageism's narrative of our later life stages views it as powerlessness, uselessness, and death.²⁸ Traditional metaphors for our life span are reflected in biological theories of aging. For example, life is seen as a hill, where the physical peak is reached in early middle age with the remainder of our lifespan represented as all down hill. In 1999 during the United Nations International Year of the Older Persons a different aging metaphor was presented as one of growth. This was represented in the conference logo where the three curved shapes provided an image of growth and movement (Figure 5). As designers we should always filter our designs for that life stage in positive terms of growth, independence and healthy interdependence.

9. Review policies and practices of other professions and institutions for evidence of ageism.

In our society, ageism manifests itself through widespread mistreatment and denial of medical care and services, workplace discrimination, physical (elder abuse), financial abuse, stereotypical and degrading images in media and marketing.²⁹ In order to address ageism within products, designers need to be aware and critical of how ageism manifests itself in other areas of our society. Assignments where students investigate and analyze how older people are depicted on television, in the news media, in film, and in advertising is an engaging way to explore stereotyping and stigmatization in our culture.

10. Mandating design for an aging population as a course.

Specifically address design for an aging population and the issues of ageism through electives, readings, design studios, and program concentrations.

A fundamental shift

The aging population is not a trend but a fundamental shift that is being felt around the world. The United Nations reported that in 2006, the number of older persons surpassed 700 million. By 2050, 2 billion older persons are projected to be alive representing 22 percent of the population. This is a worldwide phenomenon, as the pace of population ageing is now faster in developing countries than in developed countries³⁰. Responding to the needs of an aging population, whose growth and numbers will be unprecedented in human history, is one of the most important and continuing issues for our world.

Industrial design has a history of responding to fundamental changes in our society. In the past, there have been important efforts made in addressing design issues for an older population such as; designer and gerontologist Patricia Moore's work in aging, James Pirkel's work in transgenerational design, and current efforts in inclusive and universal design. What we need now is to add more research into the areas of design for an aging population and ageism. There is a need to address the pervasive influence of ageism in our society and how it impacts our profession and the design of products. This exploration of ageism will not only make us better designers but better people too.

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