



## An Empathetic Participatory Design Tool

### The Program

The Participatory Design Association's *Aging in Focus* tool incorporates empathy and participatory design to gather data on some of the most pressing needs, concerns, and joys of older adults. This data, in turn, can enable a range of stakeholders – including public agencies and policymakers, designers and developers, building managers, and program providers – to influence and change policies, design, and programming to better support our aging society.

The *Aging In Focus* tool's collaborative approach consists of:

- multiple customizable, interactive workshops and an exhibition to collect, co-curate, and showcase older adults' stories and lived experiences via photography and storytelling across multiple channels;
- a methodology to convert this information into qualitative data that complements existing quantitative data sources; and
- an ever-growing, publicly available online repository of visual, audio, and categorized data on how older adults experience their built and community environments.

Anticipated outcomes and impact include:

- Showcasing individual and personal experiences
- Fostering interaction among older adults and their communities.
- Centering older adults in the participatory design process
- Conveying on-the-ground experiences to relevant stakeholders

### Background

The [Urban Design Forum](#) (UDF) connects and inspires New Yorkers to design, build and care for a better city. For over 40 years, UDF has shaped the conversation around the future of New York City and cities around the world. UDF's Forefront Fellowship cultivates emerging leaders in urban design, development, policy, and advocacy.

UDF's 2024–2025 "[Lifelong](#)" cohort envisions a New York City where older adults can thrive with support and dignity. Currently, one in five New Yorkers is over 65 years old, and the population of this fastest-growing age group in the city is only expected to boom. A team of "Lifelong" cohort

professionals formed the Participatory Design Association (PDA), a group dedicated to elevating older adults' diverse voices and lived experiences as the central driver in co-creating a more equitable, resilient, and joyful New York City.

## Pilot

In May & June 2025, PDA piloted its *Aging in Focus* tool in partnership with [Dorot](#), a nonprofit organization addressing the challenges of an aging population. Over the course of two workshops and a photo exhibition, participants: took pictures based on prompts designed to capture data for designers, developers, and program providers; worked with the PDA team to design and co-curate their top photos, and shared their experiences and perspectives with attendees at a photo exhibition. Initial outcomes and findings include:

- Older adults are keen to share their lived experiences and provide feedback on their built and community environments with policymakers, designers, and developers.
- The experiences of capturing moments in their lives and co-curating a photography exhibit allowed participants to reflect on their experiences and engage with others.
- Participants suggested that future iterations of the program include more workshops over a longer period of time.
- The program activities produced “thick data” (qualitative information and content) that provides valuable insights on this target population and complements the “big data” (quantitative) that is already available to stakeholders who are designing for an aging society.

## Contact Us

PDA seeks to scale the *Aging in Focus* tool's reach and impact. We welcome feedback from and collaboration with potential partners and funders who serve older adults, including:

- Public agencies and policymakers
- Designers and developers
- Building management
- Program designers and providers
- Technology developers
- Philanthropic and corporate funders

If you are interested in working with us, have feedback to share, and/or would like to be notified of future news and updates, please contact us at [aginginfocusproject@gmail.com](mailto:aginginfocusproject@gmail.com) and/or follow us on Instagram at [@aginginfocusproject](https://www.instagram.com/aginginfocusproject).