Playing & Place
Older adult perceptions of playful environments in Victoria, BC.

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Overview of Project

- First research project to extensively examine older adult play and the built environment.

- The goals of Aging Playfully are to:

(1) Develop a conceptual framework and practical guidelines of older adult play.
(2) Analyze the spatial distribution of play infrastructure.
(3) Determine the political and social acceptability and feasibility of future older adult play interventions.
(4) Develop recommendations for planning and public health policy.

Introduction

- Around the world populations are aging rapidly.

- Canadians 65 years of age and older currently make up 18% of the national population, and by 2068 that number is expected to rise to 30%[1].

- Simultaneously more people are living in cities than ever before.

- Therefore, more people are aging in cities.

- However, cities were not designed to meet the needs of an aging population.

Social Isolation & Loneliness

- One of the most prevalent challenges of growing older is social isolation and loneliness.

- As people age, their physical and cognitive worlds can shrink as they become increasingly likely to experience impairment and/or reduced mobility[2].

- Interactions between physical and social environments and individual competencies can produce a limiting environment that can result in decreased physical and mental wellbeing[3], further pushing an older adult into the experience of social isolation.
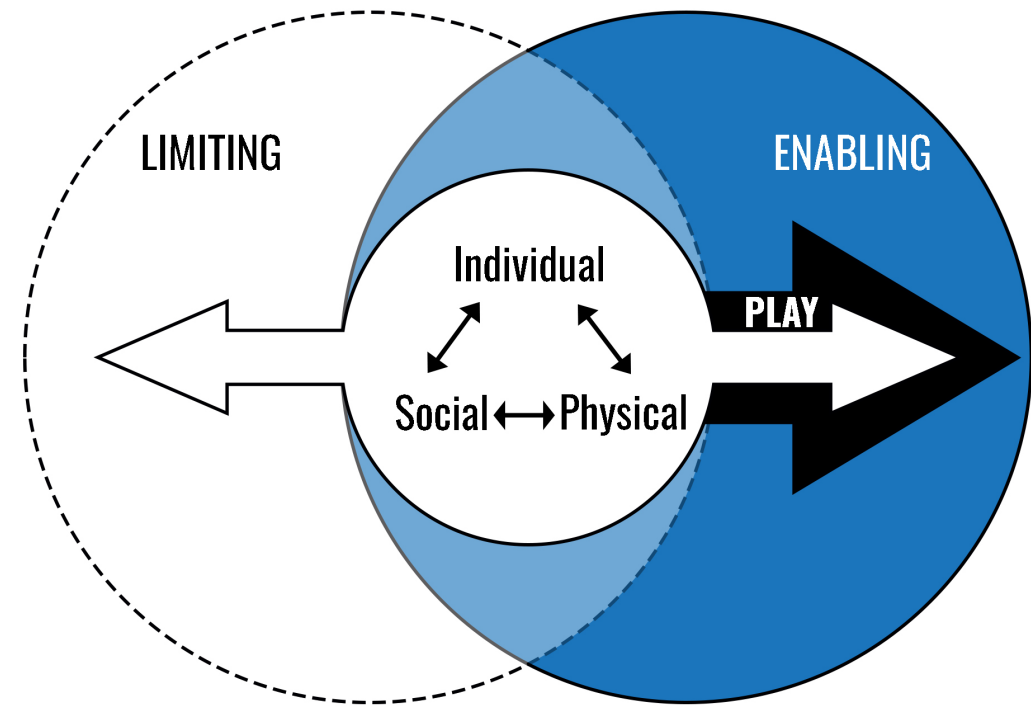
Beyond Access

- Age-friendly planning has emerged as a discourse for interventions to promote enabling environments by minimizing the risks associated with aging[4].

- However, there is more to inclusive design than just caution and access.

- Built and social environments can be designed to optimize opportunities for older adult wellbeing, not only to minimize risk.

- These enabling environments can do more than minimize risk, they can generate play.
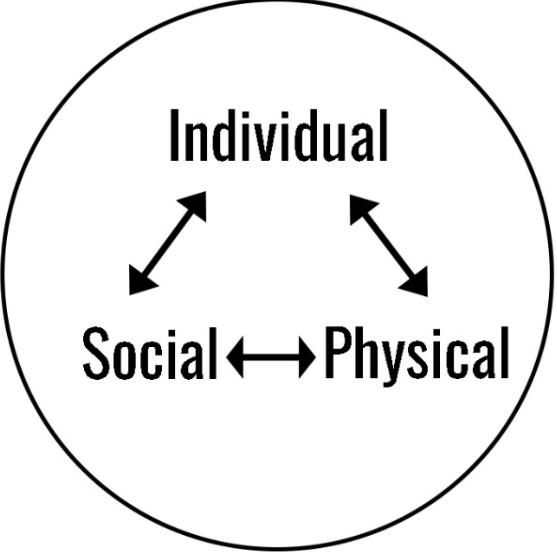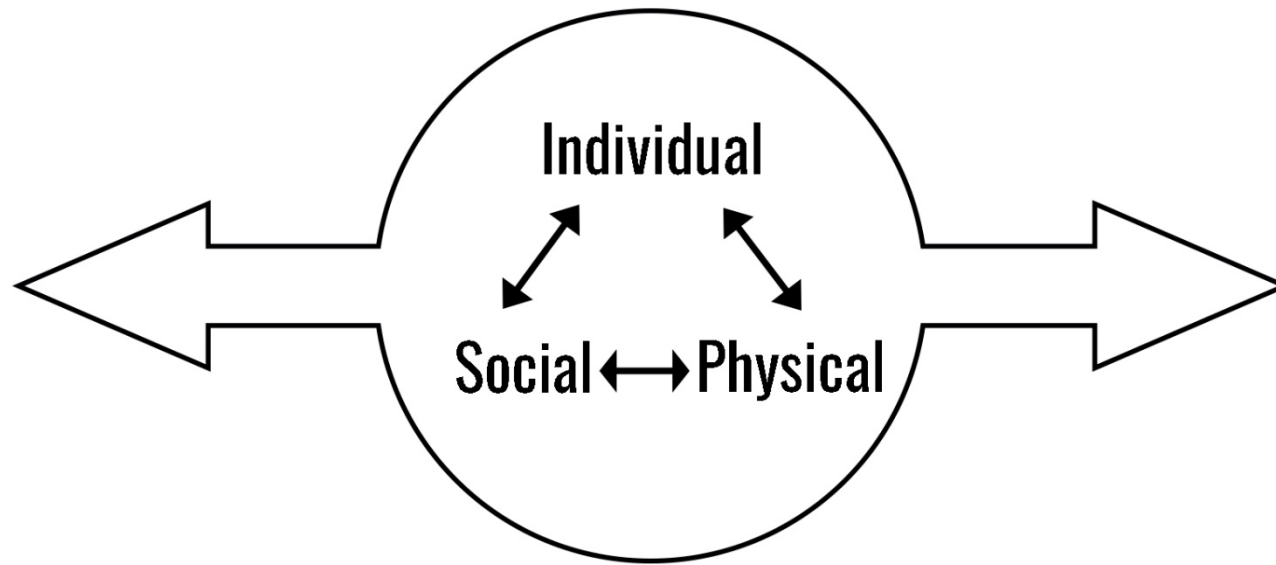
Play

- Play as a spontaneous and creative behaviour is well suited to combat older adult loneliness.

- Play improves community relationships and increases social capital and social connections[5].

- Only recently has play emerged as an urban design consideration capable of improving interactions and experiences with the built environment, and thus far is limited to the child-friendly context[6].

- Leading us to question: "What environments do older adults find playful?"
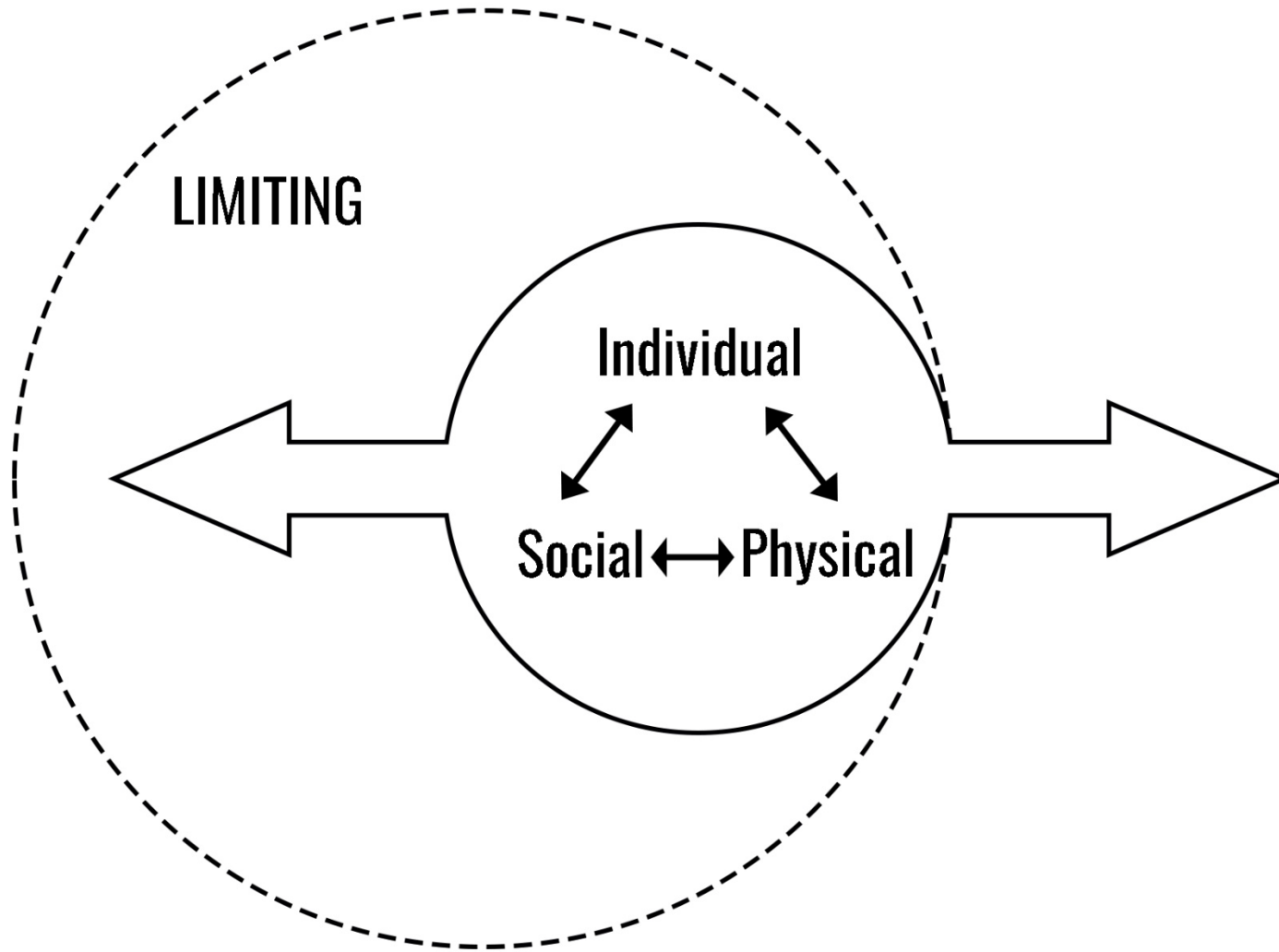
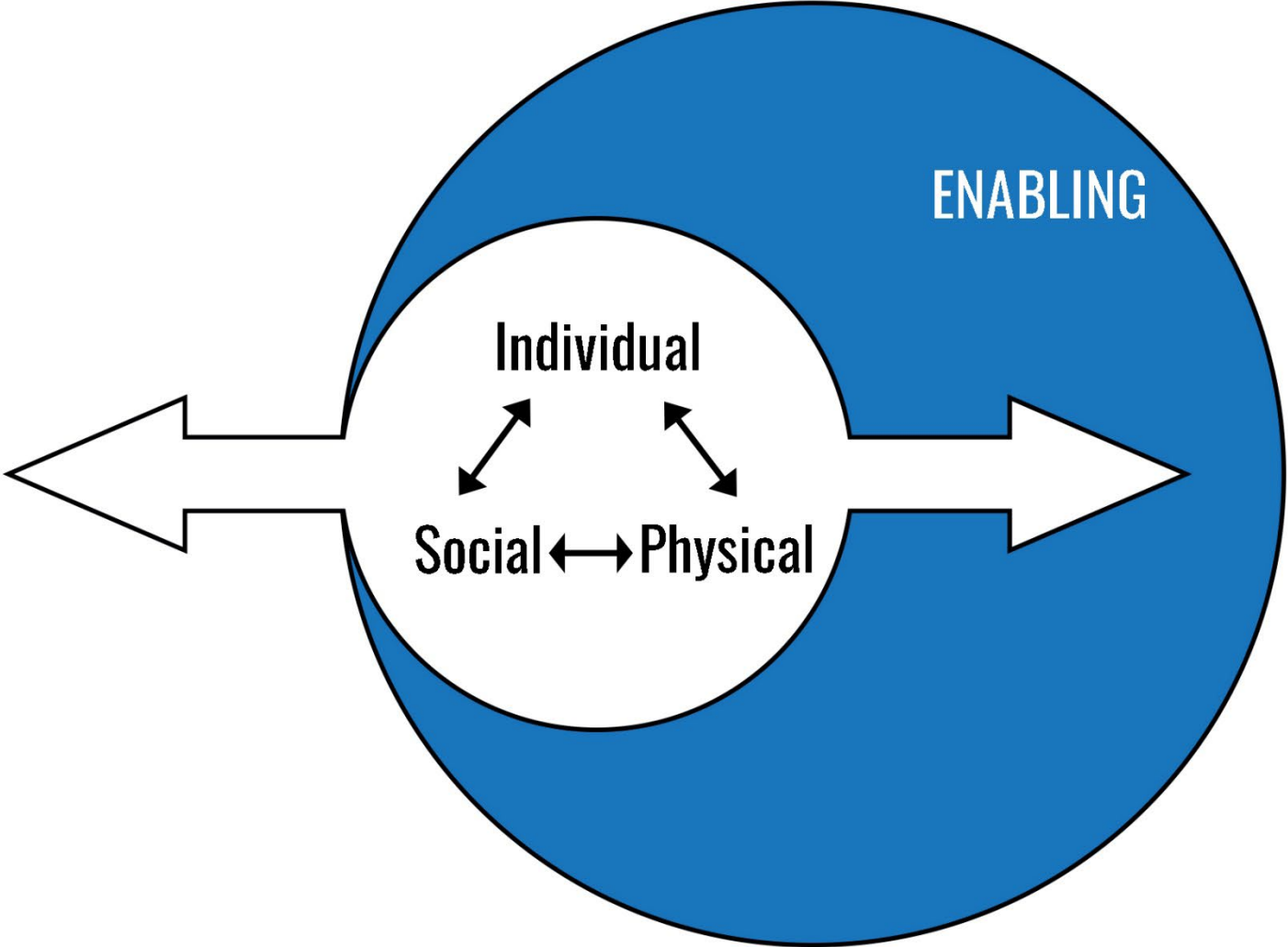# Sociospatial Environmental Wellbeing + Play Conceptual Framework

By detailing the theoretical relationships between individuals and their surroundings and delineating how these relationships contribute to limiting or enabling environments, the conceptual framework serves as a tool that can be used by planners and policy makers to revaluate perceptions of older adult interaction with the local environment.

ENABLING

Individual

Social ⟷ Physical

LIMITING

ENABLING

Individual

Social ⟷ Physical

LIMITING   ENABLING
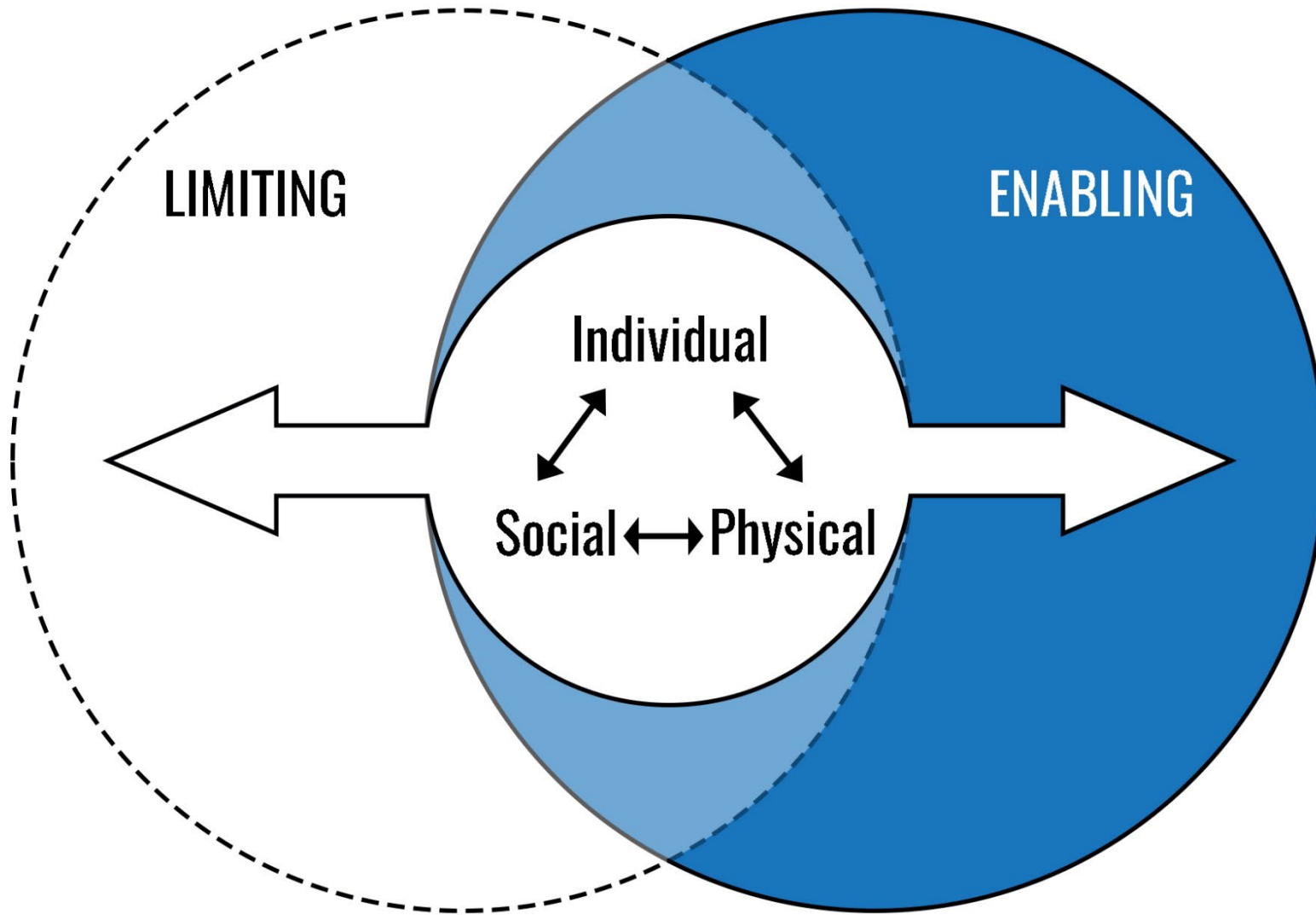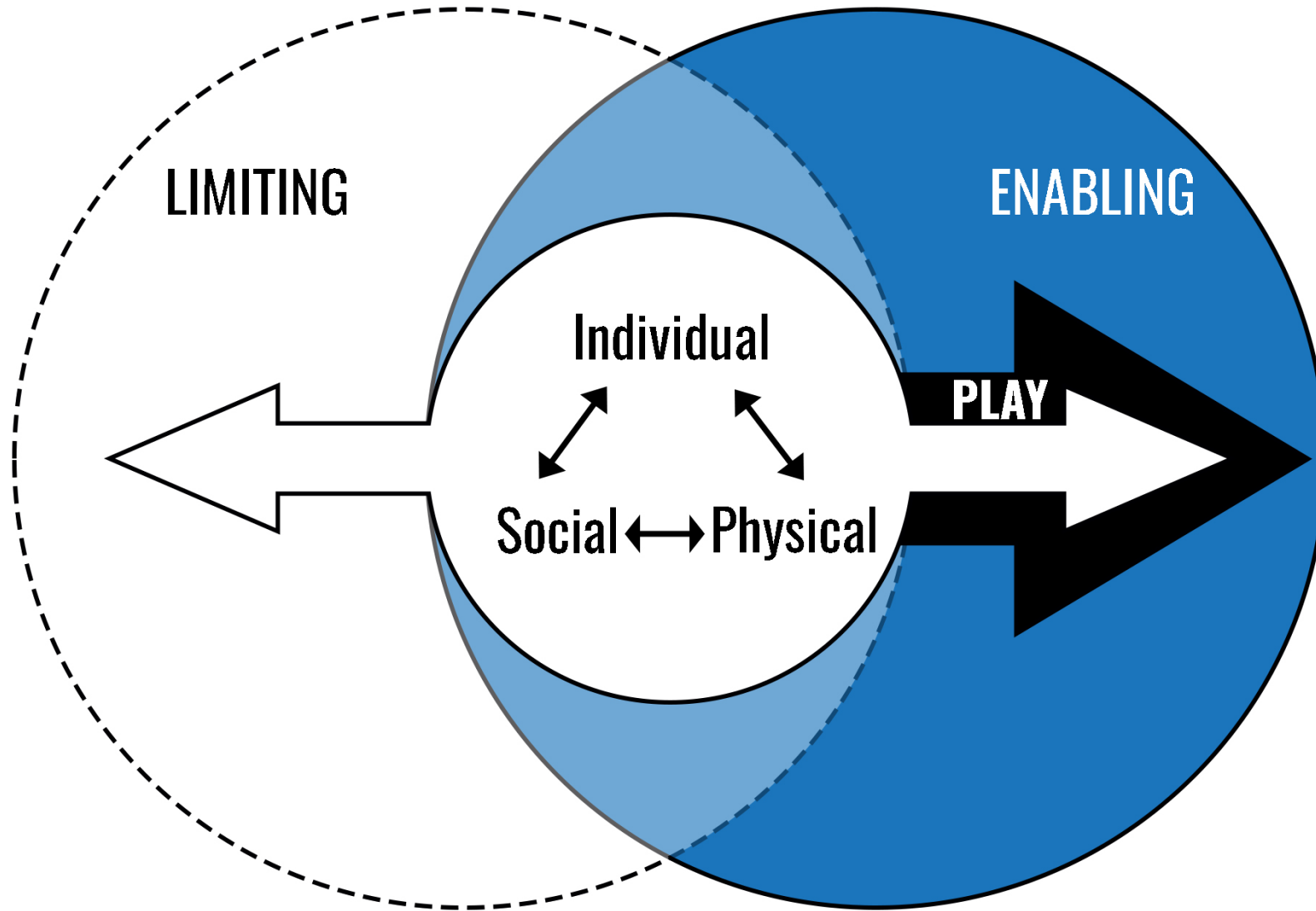
Individual

Social ↔ Physical

PLAY

Methodology

- Case study of Canada's demographically oldest city: Victoria, BC.

- 14 participants were selected to take part in the participatory photovoice exercise.

- Photovoice allows the researcher to view the phenomenon of play through the perspective or "lens" of the participant[7,8].

- Participants were asked to capture photos of environments that (1) enable them to play; or (2) limit their ability to play.

- A series of focus groups were held in which participants shared their photos/experiences.

Preliminary Results

"I guess as a senior we made it this far without major disasters, that we're not wanting to invite another one going into dangerous environments as our reactions aren't quite as quick, or not as agile as we once were, or thought we were."

"I love to go to places where you can stop and visit with dogs and go with my daughter and her dogs for example. But there's actually no walking path...I wouldn't be able to walk into it. It's just an example of an area that obviously wasn't planned for older people, or accessible walking. It's nature, and it's nice that there's not a lot of concrete because I don't like places full of concrete, but a path doesn't require a lot of thought."

"This one, I like, particularly, because in it you can see a pathway to the beach. And then it's just kind of the joy, there's flowers, and the idea of, you know, there's opportunity there, on the beach to throw stones… There were some other pictures of the beach or pictures of the bike path there, but it didn't as clearly show variety of – like you could pick your setting."

"I've seen people there playing. I mean you can play checkers; you could even do it with some stones, right. That would require saying to a friend, "Hey let's go play, it's beautiful". Grab a coffee."

"I think it's really important that you do make it inclusive. There's a lot of seniors whose you know children, grandchildren are not around. They're here, isolated and public space, or public gathering space is important to be inclusive to all. I don't have children or grandchildren, but I love watching children. And to be playful in the public space where most of our lives as seniors we're isolated from the younger set. And I just love to engage the many different ages is what I consider kind of playful you know?"

Enabling Environments

Natural	"It was just this sense of rebirth and a sense of oh, this is wonderful. I can sit and play by just watching this – watching nature as it's slowly coming back"
Multi-Use	"You can enjoy the beach down here, a little bit further down you can even launch a boat if you want to. And you can walk all around. You can walk in the grass. You can sit, you can do whatever."
Social/Intergenerational/Communal	"I may only see one other person but at least I had eye contact above the mask. So to be able to commune, and communicate with other people was a big thing for me." "The social component of my play is critical"
Learning / Programming	"Learning I find to be a big part of my kind of play. I want to be learning something."
Nostalgic	"I always as a child, loved to be in the woods. And so this is a way of doing it, only as an older adult." "Watching perennials come up in the spring, that was a good time in my life."
Safe / Accessible	"They're friendly environments…you don't have to worry about traffic or crossing busy roads at all, or dealing with cars." "I like it because it's accessible. I can walk there and walk home. I do have a balance issue so I like flat things."
Interactive	"Games that are on the tile and the pavement that you can stop at or something that you can interact with."
Amenities	"Public ones (washrooms) would facilitate a lot more outdoor and more prolonged activity."

Limiting Play Environments

Dangerous	"There are bike lanes along there, but the traffic is so fast. It is like a straight stretch and everybody's going 70 km an hour, so I try to avoid that one. There is nothing playful about that speed."
Stressful	"The cars are flying by so fast. It's like you've got to have your wits about you every minute."
Dis-organized	"The condos, most of the things that are built are ad hoc, like the design…it's so badly designed it's not human, and it's not made to enhance play."
Exclusive	"Going down the road and you're looking through the houses at the beautiful water out there and there's no way to get to it. You're going down the road and it's all private property."
Inaccessible	"Historically where I would have thought about going to play, I never go to those places anymore. They're just not accessible to me, and I wouldn't find them enjoyable."
Noise Pollution	"Walking along busy street, even on a sidewalk with impaired hearing, walking with friends, it's more difficult to hear them…I avoid walking on those just because of the noise level."
Constrained	"It's really hard because they don't have much space to do anything in their layers of apartments."

Summary

"It's important that we build things that bring people together as opposed to separate."

"For me play is singing"

"Play is to get engrossed in what you're doing"

Play as an intervention ⟷ Play as an activity ⟷ Play as a state of being

Play as an intervention, play as an activity, and play as a state of being, all have an important role in how people interact with their environment, with each other and with themselves.

Even a small intervention in public space may very well expand a social and support network, combat social isolation, cultivate a sense of belonging, and promote physical activity. Above all play can give purpose.

Thank You!
Questions?
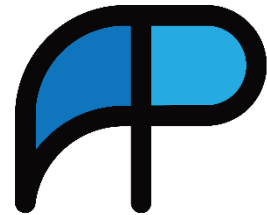
Want to learn more? agingplayfully.ca

Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada

Conseil de recherches en sciences humaines du Canada

Canada

Population and Place Research Lab

Aging Playfully

Queen's UNIVERSITY

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