

# American Society on Aging

## Aging Today

### November 2016

*“Design WITH me, not FOR me!”* That’s the mantra used by Dr. June Fisher, 82 year old physician and designer with the CITRIS program at the University of California, Berkeley. As a person with a career in occupational medicine and insights drawn from her current elderhood, Dr. Fisher plays a key role in educating design students, colleagues, and entrepreneurs who claim to be adapting and developing successful new technologies for an aging population. She recently judged a “pitch” event where young designers could present their ideas for new products and services. “She noted that most of the start-up pitches were delivered in a way that ignores and disregards most seniors’ acute awareness of their needs, and leads to products that inappropriately address seniors’ needs”. ([cited in Aging2.0](#))

We often hear stories about the mis-match between developing technologies and the lifeworld of elders. There is an ongoing lag in the adoption of new technologies by older adults, when compared with younger ones. We might question whether the field of design has not suffered from the separation of observer and observed (expert and “user”) so characteristic of positive science. Traditional design and art are often organized around the notion that outcomes and products are fore-ordained by a pre-existing image held by an expert, albeit based on some presumption about the problem or need of the client or the tastes of the spectators.

Co-design, as a growing international movement, blurs the divide between expert and user, where the latter takes on the role of co-creator or co-producer. In this way of thinking, so beautifully described by anthropologist Tim Ingold, the idea does not precede the act of making (the Cartesian model) so much as making itself produces the idea. Citing Paul Klee’s famous aphorism, “drawing is like taking a line for a walk”, Ingold holds that the process of design “does not transform the world. It is rather part of the world’s transforming itself... if there is a distinction between design and making, it is not between the projects and their implementation but between the pull of hopes and dreams and the drag of material constraint.” (2013:146)

Drawing a parallel, Italian designer Ezio Manzini suggests that every product is “beta” in character insofar as it is interpreted and adapted by the user; that the designer should stand close enough to understand the everyday and local experience that distinguishes problem-solving from sense-making (2013). The “beta” nature of all products was well illustrated in a recent New York Times article about homegrown methods that seniors use to modify products to suit their needs. While older commentators objected to the author’s use of the term hacking to describe this practice, most agreed that older people routinely take things (products) into their own hands. The ubiquity of this practice suggests that we are totally missing the boat by not including older adults at all stages of the design process. ([Hacks Can Ease the Trials of Aging](#))

Co-design will play a growing role in the field of aging and technology. Can new environments, services, and technologies be developed by supporting elders to be authentic partners (co-creators) in the design process? Doing this means going beyond the simple focus group (input) model of participation to create methods by which elders 1) help ask the first questions, 2) lend their insights to design and making, and 3), provide the local context for design, development and evaluation. Some innovative programs are leading the way.

- Avenidas, a San Francisco Bay area program for, and with, seniors, is developing the [Generations Lab](#), a space for introducing and supporting older adults in learning new technologies and employing that knowledge to assist entrepreneurs in shaping age-friendly products and technologies.
- The [Senior Planet Exploration Center](#) is the latest innovation in computer training from the longstanding OATS (Older Adults Technology Program) founded in Brooklyn in 2004. The Center is located on a street front in Manhattan's Chelsea Neighborhood and is outfitted with the latest consumer technology options in a comfortable and welcoming environment. Patrons use state of the art technology for mobile devices, internet access and engage in collaborative training in digital photography and gaming with educational screenings, a video chat room, and a collaborative work station and open access computer stations.
- One of the most venerable co-design projects is the [Age and Ability Research Lab](#) at the Helen Hamlyn Centre for Design at the Royal School of Art in London. For over ten years, students and faculty at the centre have worked intimately with older adults and people with disabilities to observe, converse and better understand their activities of daily living with a view to developing prototypes and working with industry research partners to test and bring new products to the marketplace. The Inclusive Design Toolkit is a wealth of rich information about the methods of co-design, applicable to many scenarios, whether they involve technology, products, environments, or services.
- Richard Caro, is CEO of [Tech-enhanced Life](#), a public benefit corporation that researches and evaluates technology for seniors. In the spirit of co-design, Richard has organized The Longevity Explorers. The Explorers meet monthly to talk about unmet needs associated with growing older; critique specific products; brainstorm solutions to some of the challenges of aging; and compare notes about gadgets they like to use. As the work of the seniors comes to be known by designers and developers in the marketplace, we can anticipate better design and, ultimately, a better quality of life in later years.

- CITRIS is the Center for Information Technology in the Interest of Society, based at the University of California, Berkeley. In the spring of 2016, CITRIS piloted its first co-design course built upon co-creator partnerships with older adults – Navigating the Human Path. Undergraduate design students and older adults spent the semester together learning how designing with, rather than for, can solve address important needs of older adults and, perhaps more importantly, how older adults can inform the design process. As a co-instructor in the course, June Fisher, cited above, keeps students on target with plea ... “Don’t come up with an idea and then try to impose it upon me...”

[Navigating the Human Path Highlight](#) (video 1:28)

[82 year old physician, designer and entrepreneur June Fisher from San Francisco shares her experiences with badly designed products](#) (audio 21:14)