

Urban outdoor walking behaviour and walk-friendly environments: older adults' experiences of daytime walking in a pilot case study

KIRAN M. GERHARDSSON, ELLEN HELLBLOM, CHRISTINA BROGÅRDH, ÅSA B TORNBERG, STEVEN M SCHMIDT
Lund University, Sweden

Highlights

- Older adults' daytime urban walking involves experiential engagement with the environment beyond physical activity.
- Brief positive environmental or social encounters (urban outdoor glimmers) can elicit pleasure and improved mood.
- Experience-centred urban design may enrich older people's daytime walking, increase walkability and support wellbeing.

Background

- Previous research has identified many benefits of walking outdoors, e.g. improved health and pleasure.
- Little is known about older people's preferences, self-selected walks and the motivations behind their walking behaviours.
- As part of an ongoing pilot case study (Gerhardsson et al., 2026), we explore how older people experience their daytime outdoor walks.
- The results have implications for creating walk-friendly opportunities in urban environments.

Methods

- Sixteen volunteers aged 71–89 (mean 79) took a self-selected daytime outdoor walk, wearing a chest-mounted action camera to record the surroundings (Fig 1, 6).
- The researchers observed participants' behaviour and environmental features while walking behind the participants. One researcher tracked the route and speed using a GPS smartwatch (Fig 2).
- During the subsequent interview, participants described their walk experience while watching the video on a tablet.
- Interviews were analysed thematically.

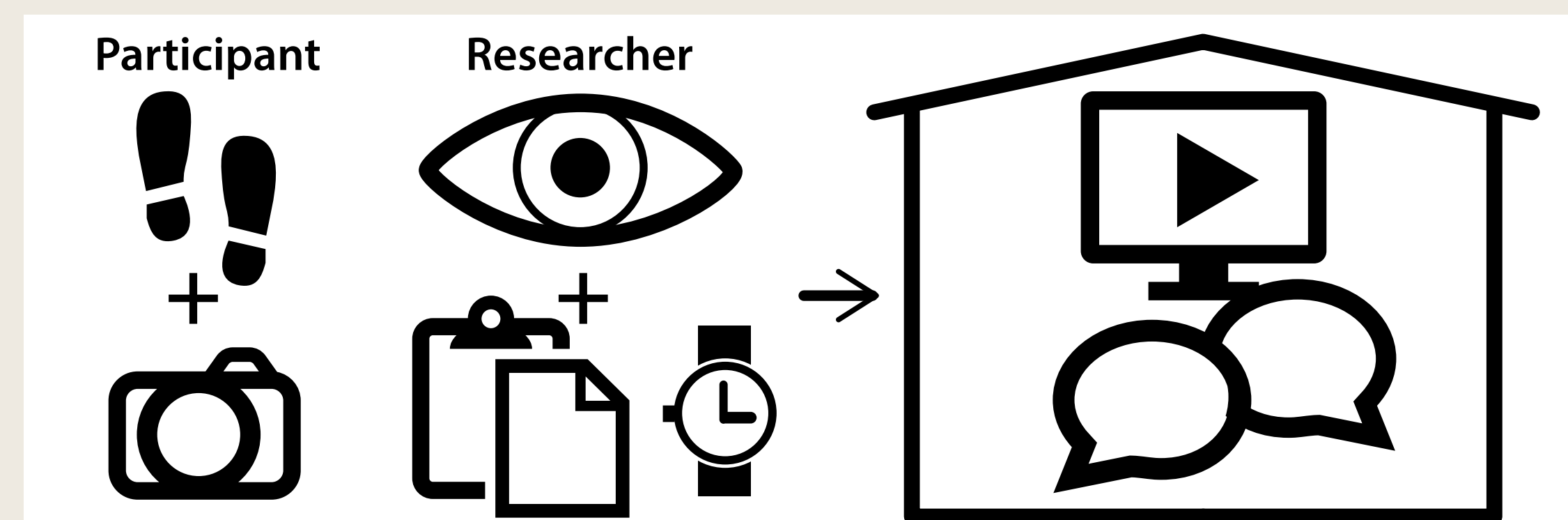


Figure 1. A novel multi-method approach

Results

The preliminary analysis resulted in three main themes reflecting participants' walking experiences:

1) Movement and stillness. While a few walked continuously, others appreciated walking and pausing, either for rest (catching one's breath or resting one's legs) or for pleasure (Fig 3).

2) Urban outdoor glimmers capture such pleasure, including positive moments (e.g. sunlight reflection, swans and waves) that elicit positive mood changes (Fig 4).

3) Visual variation and diverse activities enriched the walk experience (e.g. to see far, a mix of old and new buildings, and greenery and water) (Fig 5).

Reference: Gerhardsson, K.M., Brogårdh, C., Tornberg, Å.B. et al. (2026). A municipality implemented behavioural intervention to improve quality of life among older adults: protocol for a mixed-methods pilot case study. *Pilot and Feasibility Studies*, 12(47), 1–13.

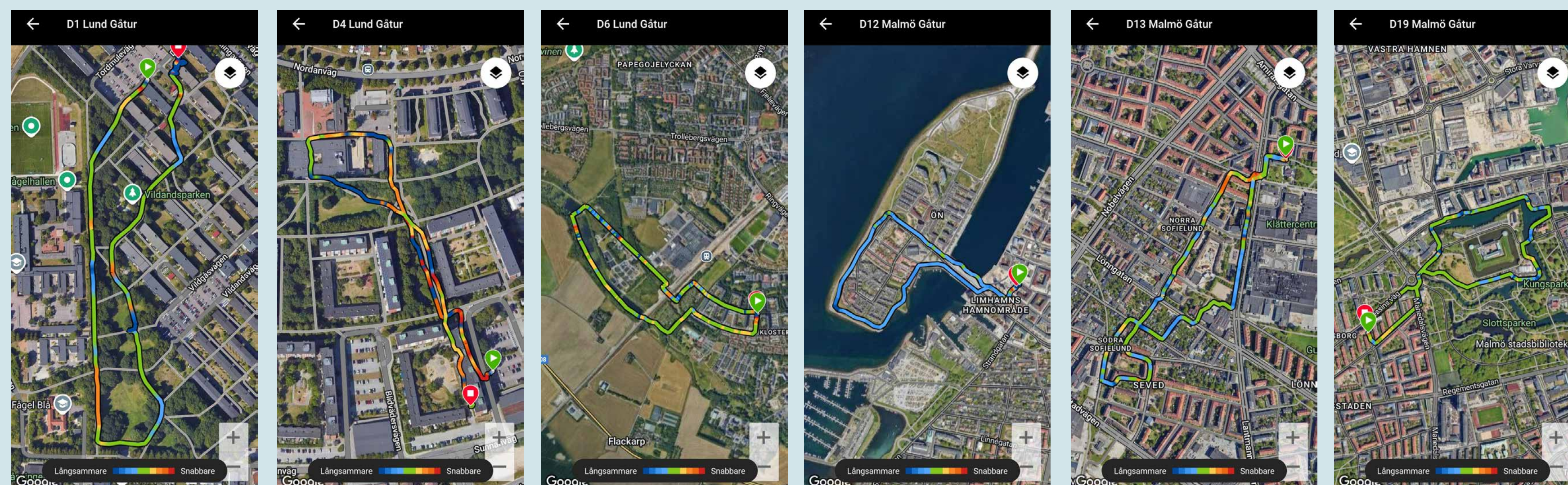


Figure 2. Screenshots from the mobile phone tracking app (paired with the researcher's GPS smartwatch) show 6 of 16 walks

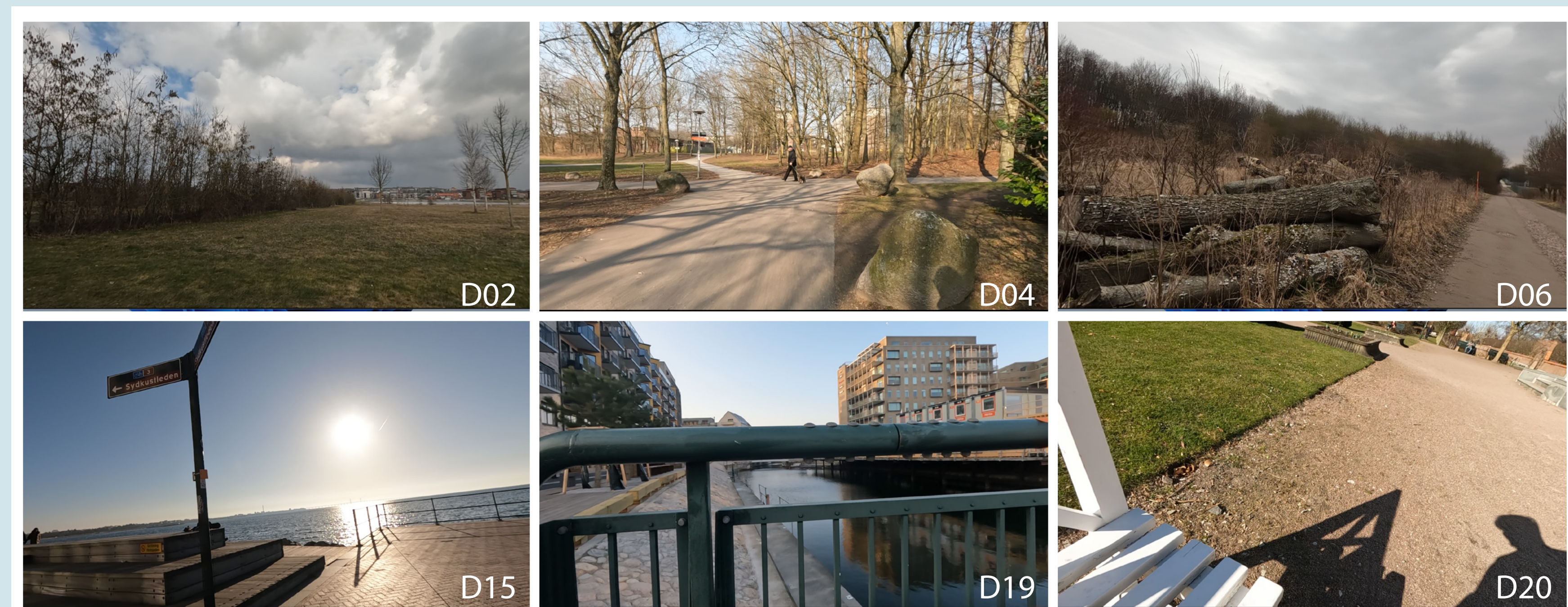


Figure 3. *Movement and stillness*. Examples of reasons for pausing drawn from participants' accounts: to sit by the pond to watch birds (D02), sit on a boulders (D04), look at flowering catkin on a willow (D06), catch one's breath or rest one's legs (D07), enjoy the sun reflections in the water (D15), lean against a bridge railing to look at the water (D19), sit to rest one's back a little (D20).



Figure 4. *Urban outdoor glimmers*. Examples from participants' accounts: bulbs blooming (D01), petting a strange dog (D06), the sound of the waves (D12), the sunset (D19), a sparkling lake surface (D20), the consideration of others on a narrow pavement (D35)



Figure 5. *Visual variation and diverse activities*. Examples from participants' accounts: nice houses (D02), 'Especially when everything is green, it is so surprisingly leafy and nice to walk there. And then the water on one side ...' (D14)

Figure 6. (below). Pre-testing the novel multi-method approach with a volunteer, who did not participate in the study

Note: While triggers are environmental stimuli causing stress reactions, glimmers are the opposite. Glimmers refer to small moments that activate the nervous system to feel safe and calm. Ref: Dana, D. (2018). *The Polyvagal Theory in Therapy. Engaging the Rhythm of Regulation*. Norton Professional Books.

