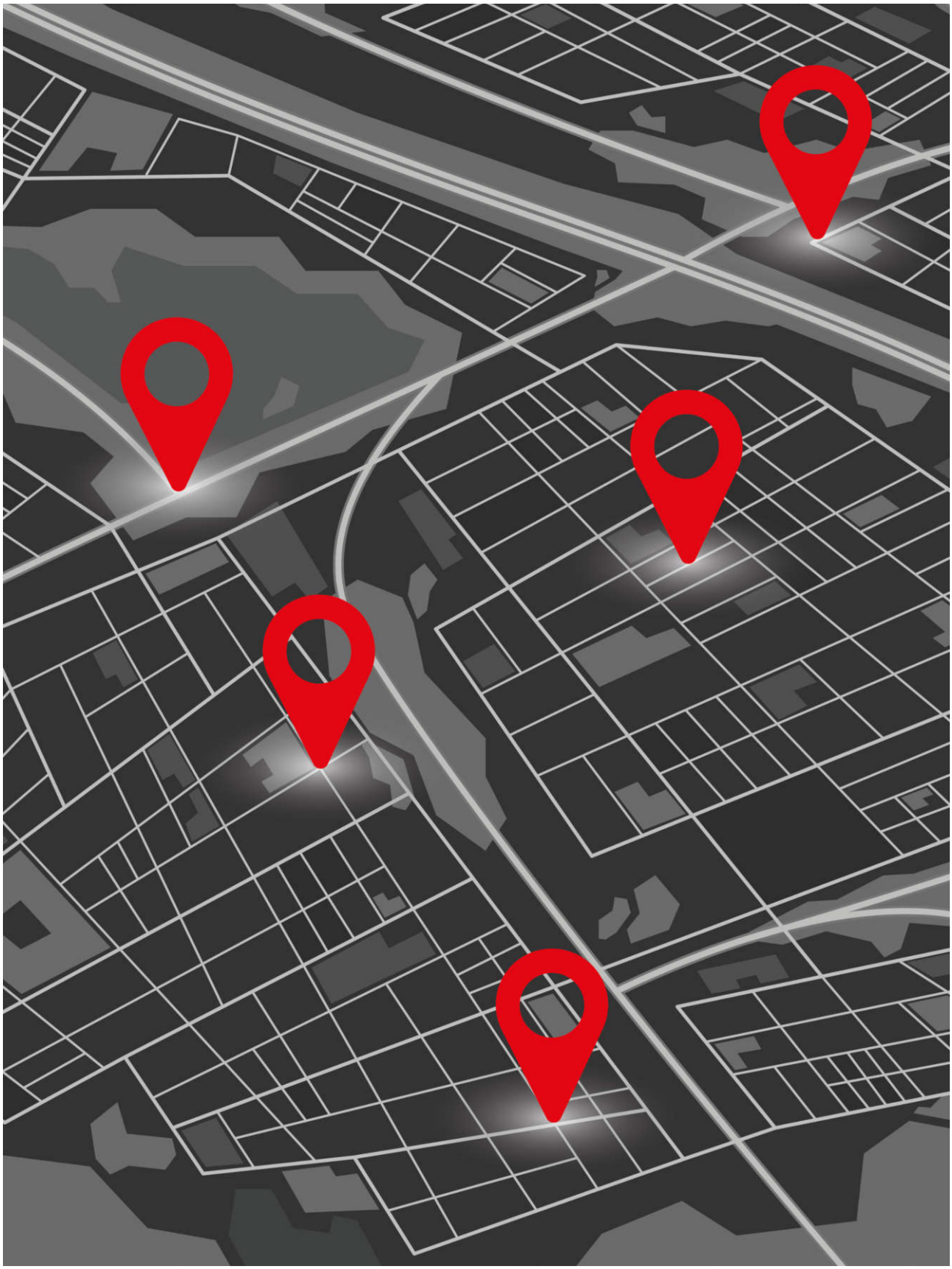
STUDENT AWARDS 2014 - 2025



Quality in parking

STORIES OF AGING AND ACCESS

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Stories of aging and access: exploring capabilities and challenges of accessibility for urban elderly through microstories

By 2040, one in four Dutch residents will be 65 or older, underscoring the need to address mobility and accessibility for this growing demographic. Despite the size of this group, transport planning often marginalises the elderly, treating them as a uniform group and ignoring their diverse needs. Elderly populations, particularly women, are vulnerable to transport poverty, with mobility being strongly linked to independence and well-being. However, the current accessibility studies available, conducted by the Planbureau voor de Leefomgeving, rely on oversimplified, time- or distance-based measures, and mostly to healthcare destinations. These simplifications challenge transport justice and fail to reflect the complex realities of perceived accessibility, and the complex realities of the 65+ demographic's experiences and preferences.

Research framework: Capabilities Approach and microstories

This research uses the Capabilities Approach, which focuses directly on the quality of life that individuals are actually able to achieve, as a conceptual framework. The research focuses on the interplay between resources, personal abilities, and individual circumstances to analyse accessibility for older people. To provide detailed insights, it uses *microstories* – personal narratives of mobility – collected through interviews with elderly residents in Rotterdam. This approach highlights the factors shaping accessibility, including health, income, gender, and local infrastructure.

Findings: mobility profiles and accessibility patterns

One of the most significant findings is that there is no single, uniform category of 'the elderly' associated with a specific set of skills for achieving access.

The study identifies three distinct mobility profiles which describe different levels of accessibility. These profiles were not necessarily defined by age, but more by factors such as individual health, ongoing commitment and proximity to important facilities.

For example, 'shut-in' residents adapted to their circumstances by limiting their activities to a small, local radius. On the other hand, residents who were 'forcedly mobile' faced the greatest accessibility challenges, as they were unable to limit their activities and instead had to contend with the difficulties of using public transport to reach important destinations.

Other microstories showed very active older adults who moved freely around the city and pursued numerous activities without encountering any significant mobility problems, categorised as 'local beneficiaries' or 'spinning citizens'. This highlights the vast diversity in actual mobility among older people, demonstrating that old does not necessarily equate to infirm or immobile.

Therefore, grouping elderly people into such mobility profiles has a much greater potential for creating policy that takes the mobility barriers into account and therefore meets needs, rather than simply sorting people into age groups.

Challenging traditional accessibility measures

The focus on the different resources and conversion factors encompassed in this research on urban accessibility for older people, also challenged the way we look at accessibility for older people in general.

Traditional time-based and distance-based accessibility measures often fail to capture the full scope of elderly experiences. The study advocates for effort-based thresholds, which take account of the physical and

mental exertion involved in travel, especially for those with mobility impairments. It also emphasises the importance of evaluating access to social and cultural activities, as well as access to healthcare, to support overall well-being.

Broader implications and future research

Microstories cannot replace aggregated accessibility studies but can certainly play a crucial role in refining and deepening these studies. They add a layer of lived experience to the – often abstract – data of aggregated accessibility assessments. They can also predict the choices and thresholds regarding which activities will be undertaken. In this research microstories proved to be a powerful tool for analysing and exploring the unique accessibility challenges and opportunities for particular groups.

Although focused on urban Rotterdam, the study's findings are more broadly applicable. This research shows that using microstories, mobility profiles, and the Capabilities Approach provide a useful framework for tailoring transport policies to the elderly population's varied needs.

Future research should explore rural settings and longitudinal studies to understand how aging affects mobility and accessibility over time. By addressing both functional and social dimensions, such research can inform policies that enable elderly individuals to lead dignified, independent lives.