



Activate Social Vitality of Public Space for the Retired Elderly

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Abstract. As people worldwide are living longer and the aging of the population is gradually becoming more serious, the attention to the elderly population needs urgent attention, especially the retired ones. Age diversity makes for differences in people's mindsets, psychology, and behavioural habits, which can lead to a sense of strangeness in the lives of these elderly people who are no longer working. This essay will first list the different treatments encountered by age diversity in the social environment and analyse the limitations. Afterward, it will discuss three common issues that retirees encounter in daily life in terms of public spaces (communities, squares, and sideways) and provide strategies for the design of spaces to reduce their sense of exclusion. As a result, the designers' approaches to activating public spaces from the aspect of the retired elderly will be beneficial in enhancing the outgoing rate of the elderly, thus increasing the sense of social inclusion.

Keywords: Ageing, Retired Elderly, Public Space, Inclusion

1 Introduction

As advancements in healthcare facilities transpire, a consequent rise in average life expectancy can be observed. A study by Chucks [1] predicts that from 2015 to 2050, the demographic comprising individuals over the age of 60 will nearly double from 12 to 22 percent of the global population. Despite governmental initiatives to accommodate the social needs of this burgeoning ageing populace, current infrastructures designed for the elderly fall short, lacking inclusivity and accessibility. Retirees are bereft of suitable locales for engaging in social activities, resulting in a deceleration of their erstwhile lifestyle tempo and diminished opportunities for social interaction. This unfortunate circumstance foreshadows potential disruptions to their future routine. This emerging societal dynamic will likely precipitate feelings of isolation and exclusion among an increasing number of older individuals. This treatise aims to explore the challenges faced by retired seniors in public spaces globally, propose potential solutions, and thereby gain a profound understanding of how these public spaces can be better utilized within society.

2 The Different Treatments for Age

Age, a concept straddling both the social construct and biological progression domains, possesses disparate definitions across various cultures [2]. Within the modern societal framework, ageing is often perceived as a descent in aspects such as physical capability, occupational performance, functionality, and productivity [3]. Consequently, disparate age cohorts face differential treatment within society, and ageism permeates many workplaces globally [4]. Although some research indicates a lack of substantial correlation between an individual's age and workplace performance, widespread prejudiced stereotyping of the elderly persists, occasionally extending to middle-aged cohorts. The propagation of these stereotypes, coupled with the frenetic pace of life, contributes to an unjustified appraisal of age, thereby intensifying societal anxiety concerning ageing. This unhealthy cyclical phenomenon further exacerbates the marginalization of middle-aged and elderly demographics from society, rendering societal integration increasingly difficult for these individuals. This is deleterious to societies on the cusp of or already experiencing an ageing population trend. Excessive anxiety surrounding age also jeopardizes individuals' emotional well-being, thus amplifying feelings of societal alienation.

Despite the pervasive age discrimination and societal unfriendliness, protective measures have been enacted to safeguard these susceptible demographics. Given their heightened susceptibility to illnesses relative to younger individuals, the elderly are often shielded by specific policies under unique circumstances. Amidst the COVID-19 pandemic, certain Asian nations implemented protective measures, including Turkey's mandate restricting citizens aged below 20 and above 65 from public spaces to enforce social distancing[5]. While this effectively reduced COVID-19 transmission rates, safeguarding the health of elderly and young individuals, it simultaneously amplified their sense of isolation. As advancements in medical technology reduce the pandemic's impact, opportunities for the elderly to venture outdoors have arisen, albeit with lingering trepidation[14]. Consequently, it is of paramount importance to thoroughly address potential psychological challenges encountered by the elderly under such extraordinary circumstances.

This perception results in varying treatment of different age groups within communities, fostering ageism that permeates workplaces globally [4]. Despite research suggesting a weak correlation between age and workplace performance, biased stereotypes against older individuals persist, occasionally extending to those in middle age. The perpetuation of these stereotypes, coupled with the fast pace of life, fuels an unwarranted evaluation of age, contributing to heightened societal concerns about the aging process. This detrimental cycle further marginalizes middle-aged and elderly populations, making their integration into society increasingly challenging. This trend poses significant challenges for societies facing or already experiencing an aging demographic shift. The excessive emphasis on age also undermines emotional well-being, exacerbating feelings of societal exclusion.

Despite prevalent age discrimination and societal challenges, measures have been implemented to protect these vulnerable demographics. Due to their increased vulnerability to illnesses compared to younger cohorts, specific policies are often enacted to

safeguard the elderly. During the COVID-19 pandemic, several Asian nations, such as Turkey, implemented policies restricting citizens below 20 and above 65 from public spaces to enforce social distancing [5]. While effective in curbing COVID-19 transmission rates and protecting the health of these age groups, it simultaneously exacerbated their feelings of isolation. With advancements in medical technology reducing the pandemic's impact, opportunities for the elderly to engage outdoors have emerged, albeit with lingering caution [14]. Hence, it is crucial to comprehensively address the potential psychological challenges faced by the elderly in such exceptional circumstances.

3 Contradictions in Public Squares

The role of public squares should encompass enhancing the health of its users and catering to a diverse age range, with a special focus on vulnerable groups such as the elderly. The physical capacities of this demographic may not be as robust as younger individuals, hence the necessity of suitable physical fitness regimes to maintain their health. As Chipperfield & Bissell[6] propose, senior citizens could engage in communication dance, an exercise combining aerobic, strength, and balance training, to sustain bodily function and foster psychological well-being. This form of exercise also facilitates social opportunities, thereby diminishing feelings of isolation and attenuating age-related social exclusion. Consequently, it is vital to provide opportunities for seniors to engage in physical activity in safe, accessible, and comfortable public spaces. Furthermore, Fang & Chul Soo[7]highlight that seniors tend to participate in square dancing in the evenings. Thus, the surrounding areas of public squares must be well lit and maintain a low height of greenery to prevent obstruction of view. Adequate lighting fosters a sense of security for seniors wishing to dance, while a clear, unobstructed view of the surroundings enables them to gauge the safety of the space.

While social dancing can provide significant enjoyment for the elderly, there exists a scarcity of exercise locations for this demographic in certain Chinese cities. As highlighted in the article 'Beijing Is Cracking Down on Dancing Grannies'[8], seniors instigate conflicts with younger generations by claiming most public spaces, including basketball courts and small parks, for fitness exercises. The primary cause of such discord is the inadequate availability of public spaces, and poor urban planning has fostered an environment of exclusion for seniors. This planning inadequately addressed the spatial requirements of diverse users and failed to accommodate unforeseen circumstances. Such conflicts can potentially incite antagonism between young and old, thereby exacerbating misunderstandings related to age disparity and reducing social inclusion[12]. Therefore, it is crucial to establish spaces that various age groups can utilize without infringing on each other's activities, in order to foster a positive public space.

4 Design of Sidewalk

Enhancing the accessibility of pedestrian pathways is pivotal in encouraging the elderly to partake in public space activities, thereby promoting a healthy, active lifestyle. Sugiyama & Ward Thompson's research[9] conducted in the UK, elucidates that

changes in the environment post-relocation have been associated with declines in elderly individuals' cognitive abilities, thereby affecting their willingness to engage in public spaces. For instance, signage along perimeter walks that either lack distance indicators or are excessively cluttered can lead to sensory overload for elderly individuals, particularly those suffering from cognitive impairments. Moreover, landmarks serve as crucial navigational and directional cues within the landscape, providing elderly individuals with a pleasant and confident experience when adequately positioned[10]. Hence, distinct signage will instill comfort and confidence in the elderly when navigating unfamiliar terrains, thereby motivating them to utilize public transport or engage in walking activities. Consequently, elderly individuals will attempt to acclimate to their immediate surroundings and display willingness to socialize within public spaces.

Alongside the recognition of their surroundings, the elderly population also has a demand for pathway accessibility, which significantly influences their frequency of outdoor activities. Ideally, pathways should be constructed with non-slip materials and an optimal gradient of 1:12, although a maximum of 1:10 may be acceptable (Universal Accessibility, n.d.). Additionally, it's necessary to provide detectable warnings or paving on the ground to aid individuals in identifying the area (Universal Accessibility, n.d.). Considering the physical capabilities of the elderly tend to be diminished, the use of anti-slip materials can minimize the likelihood of slips and falls, thus enhancing their safety during walking activities, particularly for those who are wheelchair users. However, in certain developing countries, the design of street infrastructure is often inaccessible. The links between these streets frequently lack ramps, they don't have sidewalks with blind road provision, and there is often random parking of bicycles and cars on the sidewalk[11]. Adults usually navigate their way around these obstacles, either by squeezing through narrow spaces or by stepping onto the road, but such maneuvers pose difficulties for the elderly due to their limited physical abilities. These negative experiences while accessing public spaces can deter the elderly from frequent outdoor activities. Therefore, the accessibility of pathway designs is vital for the elderly's mobility and significantly impacts their willingness to engage in public spaces.

5 Conclusion

As the global population ages, the World Health Organisation (WHO) is showing an increasing interest in the development of age-friendly cities, aiming to cater better to the evolving needs of a rapidly aging demographic[10]. Recognizing and understanding demographic shifts, alongside effective space utilization, are fundamental elements for fostering social inclusion. While existing research indicates some nations' efforts to mitigate the difficulties encountered by the elderly in public spaces, the negative impacts of designs lacking accessibility remain conspicuous. Consequently, it is of paramount importance to create an affirming environment for the elderly, minimizing feelings of exclusion and effectively addressing aging issues. The establishment of age-friendly cities, which offer supportive built and social environments, will empower the elderly to actively partake in community life[13]. In summary, by focusing on the

experiences, perceptions, and needs of the elderly, designers can play a vital role in invigorating positive public space within society and gain a deeper understanding of this pressing social issue[15]. The concept of age-friendly cities is centered around creating supportive built and social environments. Such environments enable the elderly to actively engage in community life, thus empowering them. By placing emphasis on the experiences, perceptions, and needs of the elderly, urban designers and planners can play a pivotal role in enhancing positive public spaces within society. This approach not only benefits the elderly population but also provides designers with a deeper insight into this significant social issue. In doing so, it's essential to integrate strategies that encompass accessibility, inclusivity, and comfort, ensuring that public spaces are welcoming and functional for all ages. The establishment of age-friendly cities is a step towards a more inclusive and understanding society, where the elderly are not only accommodated but celebrated for their contributions and presence.

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