



Public open spaces planning for the elderly: The case of dense urban renewal districts in Hong Kong



Esther H.K. Yung (Assistant Professor)^{a,*}, Sheila Conejos (Research Fellow)^b,
Edwin H.W. Chan (Professor)^a

^a Department of Building and Real Estate, The Hong Kong Polytechnic University, Hong Kong SAR

^b School of Design and Environment, Department of Building, The National University of Singapore, Singapore

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ABSTRACT

The elderly population in Hong Kong is relatively concentrated in older districts that face rapid urban deterioration and there is thus an urgent need for urban renewal in government policy agenda. With the problem of land scarcity and development priorities, the quantity and quality of open space is generally far from satisfactory. Furthermore, the need for fostering social well-being for the elderly has not been effectively incorporated into the planning of urban spaces. This study aims to identify the important planning and design criteria of public open spaces for the elderly who are living in dense older districts in Hong Kong. Questionnaire surveys were conducted in elderly centres and public open spaces in two urban renewal districts. Factor analysis was used to extract the underlying factors in planning of open spaces for the elderly. Through a comparative study of the two districts, having different density, local context, socio-economic demographics and redevelopment plans, it shows an example of the incomprehensiveness in the concept of “zone separation” in which formal differences in the labels of the two districts having same zoning can disguise similarities, thereby calling for a case-by-case study of the details of the two entities. Thus, it is suggested that responsive planning and design should consider the different urban renewal districts characteristics rather than adopting standardized planning guidelines for all.

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1. Introduction

‘Open space’ zone is one of the essential land uses that intends to provide functions as “conservation, recreation, contact with nature, social or mental health” within an urban environment (Lynch, 1960, p. 396). Open space is often regarded as a fundamental part of ‘public space’ which may refer to a diverse types of physical forms and features (Tang and Wong, 2008). Public open spaces, such as parks, green spaces, sports areas, conservation and heritage, urban plaza, waterfront promenade, circulation space, etc., have long been recognized as providing a venue for the enjoyment of different activities and to enhance social interaction, social ties and create a sense of community and place attachment (NSW Government, 2010).

Research states that urban green spaces are important in high density inner city areas as they enhance social well-being (López-Mosquera and Sánchez, 2011; Kazmierczak and Timmermans

in Peschardt and Stigsdotter, 2013). Much research stresses the importance of open spaces for providing opportunities for social interaction, avoiding a sense of loneliness and promoting social life amongst the elderly (Kweon et al., 1998). Lo and Jim (2010) stated that parks in the older residential communities were the more frequently visited, even though the spaces are often related to planning blight and security concern. In urban cities, urban renewal implies densification in response to the growth of population and urbanization. In order to meet the residential requirements, bulkier and higher density buildings are usually built to replace the old ones. Urban renewal claims to improve the physical condition of old and dilapidated buildings, however, urban renewal usually involves forced eviction of inhabitants and traditional businesses and destruction of social networks and loss of local culture and identity (Pendlebury et al., 2004; Yung et al., 2014). Public open spaces in older districts and urban renewal provide a place for social interaction opportunities and the establishment of a sense of community and place attachment. However, urban renewal prompts the threat of loss of urban open spaces due to the increase of living density (Byrne et al., 2010). Therefore, it is a particular challenge to plan public open spaces that link the people and provide oppor-

* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: esther.yung@polyu.edu.hk (E.H.K. Yung).

tunities for the locals to build social ties among the old and new residents.

Hong Kong is one of the world's most densely populated cities with an average living space of only 13 square meters per person (Hong Kong Housing Authority, 2014). The greenspaces are often very small and the social function is relatively neglected (Lo and Jim, 2012). Urban renewal districts, which consist of many old and dilapidated residential buildings, provide relatively affordable housing for the elderly. Thus, many of the urban renewal districts have a high proportion of elderly. Apart from having more leisure time after retirement, the small living spaces may also encourage the elderly to spend more of their time in public open spaces, because they can offer a balance between density and liveability. With a relatively high proportion of elderly people, more attention should be paid to the planning and design of public open spaces in response to the special needs of the elderly in urban renewal districts. This leads to the question: what are the underlying factors in the planning and design of open spaces that are found to be influential for the social well-being and social lives of the elderly? Moreover, previous research has found that most healthy elderly and those with higher education levels in Hong Kong are the ones who participate in physical activities in public open spaces (Chan, 2014). With evolving social changes, the elderly's need to use public open spaces specific to the different districts should be carefully addressed. For example, the distribution of active and passive facilities in open spaces should be determined with reference to the needs of the elderly as one of the major groups of users.

In addition, in zoning and planning regime, the intended purpose of zoning as separation of incompatible uses is sometimes sceptical. Previous literature shows that there are many instances of inseparability in the present zoning system (Lai and Ho, 2001, 2002). It prompts the questions whether the same class of zone in different districts are distinguishable among their specific socio-demographics, people needs and local characteristics? How can the aspirations of different socio-demographics groups be incorporated and represented under the same open space zone? Would the same standard and guidelines for detailed planning and design of the open space zone appropriate?

This study selected two urban renewal districts in Hong Kong having distinct characteristics to examine the extent in which planning and design of public open spaces needs to take into account the different densities, local characteristics, history cultural heritage and the extent of redevelopment plans. Factor analysis was used to extract the underlying design considerations for public open spaces in the two districts, respectively. Social interactions between the elderly and different age groups cannot occur unless adequate attention is paid to the support of the special needs of the elderly. Thus, the long term significance of this study is to enhance better planning and design of urban open spaces with the social well-being of the elderly in mind. This enhanced understanding should help planners and decision makers improve the quality of public open spaces in urban renewal districts and, at the same time, enrich the sense of community and local characteristics and identity of the renewed districts.

2. Literature review

2.1. Land use zoning

In land use planning, zoning has been in place since the 1920s. One of the earliest model being the Park and Burgess' s 'Concentric zone theory' (Burgess, 1925, 1929). In theory, zoning allows the separation of land uses which are thought to be incompatible. It is claimed that zoning is a means to achieve "good morals, public health and safety and the general welfare of the commu-

nity". However, there have been many criticism on zoning along the development control almost since it emerged in the 1920s (Talen, 2012b). It is not uncommon that zoning and planning are often misaligned (Talen et al., 2016), for instance, where changes have been taken place and zoning is not able to further community aspirations. In addition, criticism on zoning also includes the degradation of public space (Ben-Joseph, 2005; Talen, 2012a, 2013). Furthermore, Lai and Ho, (2001, 2002) shows that there are many instances of non-separation in the present zoning system. It is shown that the label of a zoning class may not always be a definitive indication of its distinctiveness from another with a different or similar label (Lai and Ho, 2001, 2002).

2.2. Open space and dense cities

There has been no consensus about whether people living in dense environments with little access to open spaces would necessarily use open spaces more frequently. Some research has found that areas with high-rise buildings require better well-distributed and higher quality green spaces to improve environmental quality than areas that have low rise buildings. Other research has found that higher residential density cities have lower allocation of open spaces, as well as lower tendencies for residents to use them than residents in lower density neighbourhoods (Brown et al., 2010; Dempsey et al., 2012). In addition, people living in denser environments show weaker feelings of place attachment. It is also indicated that social interaction and social networks tend to be poor or weaker in different higher-density communities (Kuo et al., 1998; Keane, 1991; Dempsey et al., 2012). Moreover, residents in high density areas are more likely to be concerned about safety and security than lower-density residents, which affects their use and social interaction in public open spaces (Burton, 2000).

2.3. Designing public open spaces for enhancing elderly social well being

An intensive literature review on the potential factors that underlie the elderly's social needs regarding their use of public open spaces was undertaken. The factors consist of four major areas, namely, the physical setting of public open spaces, provision and community facilities, personal involvement in community life and transport and mobility. Table 1 shows the 25 shortlisted design criteria and indicates the different design aspects that contribute to enhancing the social needs of the elderly regarding the use of public open spaces either directly/actively or indirectly/passively.

2.3.1. Physical settings of public open spaces

A number of physical conditions regarding open spaces are important for ease of use for the elderly, as well as to enhance their social interactions. Cleanliness, visual attractiveness, fresh clean air and diminishment of noise and congestion contribute to the elderly's use of the spaces (WHO, 2007; Michael et al., 2006; Borst et al., 2009; I'DGO, 2007). In particular, noise level impacts the elderly's ability to interact with others (Kweon et al., 1998). Outdoor seating, urban furniture and spatial setting all provide a pleasant and comfortable environment for people to interact and rest (Turel et al., 2007; Kwok and Ng, 2008; Clarke and Nieuwenhuijsen, 2009). Moreover, lack of crowds and enjoyment of privacy also contribute to a pleasant and comfortable environment (Andersson, 2011; I'DGO, 2007).

In addition, previous studies found that access to nature and a pleasant landscape contributes to place attachment and social ties (Sugiyama and Thompson, 2007). Given that the provision of open spaces in Hong Kong is comparatively small, Hong Kong residents have this affinity for landscapes and greenery (Shi et al., 2014, p. 155). Lo and Jim (2010, p. 441) report that "local green spaces are

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