



# Social needs of the elderly and active aging in public open spaces in urban renewal



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## ABSTRACT

Urban renewal districts have a relatively high concentration of elderly people. Open spaces are important for the elderly for enhancing social interaction and active aging. However, planning and design of open spaces tend to stress on the physical and safety needs of the elderly, while social needs are not frequently addressed. This study intends to identify whether the social needs of the elderly regarding the use of public open spaces in urban renewal districts are addressed in the standard planning and design guidelines which newly planned development and districts are often based upon. Eight focus groups were conducted in elderly community centers in two urban renewal districts in Hong Kong. The results indicate that elderly people consider 'social and physical activities', 'community life facilities and services' and 'social network', as well as a 'clean and pleasant environment' to be their most important needs. Thus, planners and designers should take into consideration these criteria for enhancing the social well-being of the elderly and active aging in public open spaces in urban renewal. Furthermore, it stresses that urban renewal districts are part of the elderly's past living experiences and established social networks, which is not the case in new developments and areas. As such, the users' actual needs should be elicited rather than perceived by planners and designers.

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## 1. Introduction

With reference to an aging society, urban renewal is an important planning strategy that can help retrofit a city's existing conditions according to the needs of different people. Lau, Giridharan, and Ganesan (2005) explain that parks located near homes serve as convenient leisure spaces and extended living rooms for residents in compact cities. These open spaces provide the elderly with a venue for social interaction and also enhance active aging. Kellet and Rofo (2009) report that open spaces promote active living, while physical active lifestyles, social integration and mobility are a few of the factors that contribute to successful aging (Labus, 2012; Rowe & Kahn, 1998). Social interaction benefits the physical and psychological health of the elderly. However, while planning and design of urban renewal areas tend to emphasize on the physical and safety needs of the elderly people, the social needs are not often addressed. As socio-economic, cultural and political environments have changed, elderly people have obtained more education, better health and higher incomes. These factors allow them to have more time for leisure, recreational and learning activities. As a result, their needs and expectations of outdoor spaces have also changed.

Hong Kong is experiencing pressure as its population ages rapidly at an unprecedented speed. While the elderly population (aged 65 and

over) was 14% of the total population in 2012, it is projected to be 23% by 2025 (Census and Statistics Department, 2012). Moreover, the elderly population is usually clustered around older districts that are experiencing rapid urban deterioration. These areas are often in need of urban renewal, according to the government policy agenda. With the problem of land scarcity and the development priorities of a city like Hong Kong, open space is generally inadequate and unsatisfactory both in quantity and quality (Hong Kong Planning Department, 2011; Tang & Wong, 2008). Moreover, the need to foster social well-being for the elderly is not effectively addressed or incorporated into the planning of urban spaces. Kwok and Ng (2008) report on the lack of inclusive and comprehensive planning for the aging society in Hong Kong, but, despite this shortcoming, there is still inadequate research carried out on leisure and aging in Hong Kong (Hung & Crompton, 2005).

Aside from spatial issues, the Hong Kong Department of Health (2010) reports that 49.4% among people aged 65–74 and 41.9% for people aged 75 and above are overweight or obese, while 18.7% of people aged 65–74 and 30.9% of people aged 75 and above are classified as having "low" levels of physical activity (Hong Kong Department of Health, 2010). It has been suggested that one of the most effective preventions of dementia is to stay active and have frequent social interaction with other people (Hong Kong Alzheimer's disease Association's, 2015). These situations confirm the need for more open spaces in older districts to promote the well-being and active aging of the elderly.

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The social science field has provided much research on the social and psychological needs of the elderly (Michael, Green, & Farquhar, 2006; Sugiyama & Thompson, 2007; Wiles, Allen, Palmer, & Hayman, 2009). However, urban planners and designers seem to focus more on the physical comforts and needs of the elderly in the built environment (Fadda, Cortes, Olivi, & Tovar, 2010; Turel, Yigit, & Altug, 2007). Thus, this paper aims to identify the social needs of the elderly and link these needs to concrete public open space planning and design criteria. The elderly living in the old districts have already had real experience of using public open space in their daily lives. As such, they may have different emphasis on the social needs than those in newly planned developments or districts. While this paper acknowledges that the literature provides a list of factors for the design of open spaces, some focusing on the use by the elderly in newer planned districts, no previous attempts have evaluated the applicability of these design considerations in the special context of urban renewal, thus, the research questions in this study include how existing settings in the old districts affect the social preferences of the elderly in the context of their use of public open spaces and how these spaces encourage or inhibit active aging.

This research has selected two urban renewal districts, Kwun Tong and Sham Shui Po in Hong Kong, and used open ended questions in a focus group setting. This study adopts NVivo software as a robust tool to systematically analyze the literature and the focus group results.

## 2. Theoretical framework

### 2.1. The concept of active aging and public open space for the elderly

“Active aging” pertains to elderly people’s aspirations and needs in terms of integrating physical activity into their daily routines (e.g., walking or transportation, exercise or pleasure).

Participation in physical activity has been shown to generate positive effects on the cognitive functioning of older people (Sugiyama & Thompson, 2007). Active aging refers to the process of optimizing opportunities for participation, better health and security in order to enhance quality of life as people age. According to WHO (2007), active aging depends on a variety of influences or determinants, such as health and social services, physical environment and behavioral, personal, social and economic determinants. Thus, the roles that open spaces can play in enhancing active aging are worth examining. This study particularly focuses on the consideration and better integration of social needs and the well-being of the elderly and the physical activities carried out in public open spaces, which contribute to active aging.

### 2.2. Public open space and the benefits to the elderly

In the Hong Kong Planning Standards and Guidelines, open space refers to “a statutory land use zone for the provision of open space and recreation facilities for the enjoyment of the general public” (Hong Kong Planning Department, 2014). The scope of public open space is very broad and includes “children’s playgrounds, parks and gardens, grass games pitches, different balls courts, golf course, running and jogging tracks, beaches, swimming pool complexes, multi-purpose indoor games halls, roller-skating rinks, table tennis tables, aviaries and mammal exhibits, concrete chess tables, model boat pools, open-air theater, bandstands, barbecue pits, composite beach buildings, changing rooms, fountains, dogs’ gardens, refreshment kiosks, public toilets, public libraries, pavilions/shelters, spectator stands, camps, water sports centers, sports centers, fitness centers, stadia (outdoor), athletic grounds, cycling tracks, boating parks, sitting-out areas and zoos” (Hong Kong Council of Social Service, 2012; Hong Kong Planning Department, 2014).

According to Kellet and Rofe (2009, p. 5), a public open space is defined as a “community space within the urban environment which is intended for amenities or physical recreation either for active or passive use”. The WHO (2007) has also identified eleven elements for the design of outdoor spaces in global age cities, such as environment, green spaces and

walkways, outdoor seating, pavements, roads, traffic, cycle paths, safety, services, buildings and public toilets. These spatial planning considerations can be adopted in revitalizing open spaces for the elderly population.

In regards to the benefits of public open spaces and parks, Pasaogullari and Doratli (2004) state the important role of public spaces in enhancing social interaction and enhance people’s sense of community and safety. Particularly, these spaces offer a place for the elderly to breath and connect with nature and people (Kwok & Ng, 2008; Sugiyama & Thompson, 2007). Borst, Sanne, Graham, Dongen, and Bakker (2009) also report that walking is a major outdoor physical activity for elderly people. This is confirmed by Sugiyama and Thompson (2007) who state that outdoor environments have various benefits for older people, such as the physiological benefits needed for the maintenance and enhancement of physical health and functioning. Moreover, a sense of belonging to a place helps maintain a sense of identity and well-being, as well as facilitates successful adjustments in old age (Wiles et al., 2009).

The benefits of using public open spaces are commonly known. The question is what are the underlying planning and design considerations of public open spaces that can enhance the social well-being and active aging of the elderly. The renewal of urban facilities in older districts must be flexible in such a way that it accommodates the different activities of the elderly and addresses the social participation of older people so as to achieve long-term improvement in the quality of lives of all citizens, regardless of their age (Labus, 2012). Kwok and Ng (2008) discuss that good quality of life for the elderly includes care from family and children, social contacts, mobility, health, activities and living environment. In addition, the perception of a supportive environment, comfort, pleasantness, safety and lack of nuisance are the quality of life aspects that are influenced by the outdoor environments (IDGO, 2007). Thus, these factors will be considered in determining the social needs of the elderly in using public spaces in the current study. Table 1 provides a list of 27 design criteria identified from the literature that could enhance the social needs of the elderly in using open space. It addresses four major areas, namely physical setting, community features, personal and community life and transport directions and mobility. These factors apply to the design of open space in general with no specific attention to the special context of urban renewal. To what extent is this list of criteria applicable to the elderly living in urban renewal districts is worthy of investigation.

## 3. Issues concerning public open space planning for the elderly in Hong Kong

Since Hong Kong is a city that is highly compact and dense, the government has adopted a practical standard for open space provisions which is relatively low compared to other countries. In terms of quantity, open space provision for urban areas is 15 ha per 100,000 persons, where 9 hectares is allocated for district open spaces and 6 ha for local open spaces (Hong Kong Planning Department, 2014). The guiding ratio of passive to active open space provision is 2:1. Most of the planning standards are quantitative in nature and are based on population ratio in terms of the provision of various open spaces and facilities. It is also worth noting that these standards of provision have not been reviewed for more than 15 years, which means that the guidelines were based on the leisure habits and recreation preferences set 20 years ago (Chan, 2014).

Previous research has raised a number of quality issues concerning the planning of public open space for the elderly in Hong Kong. Although, the newly developed public open spaces have followed the guidelines on universal accessibility and precautionary installations, such as handrails, ramps, proper inclination slopes, the social needs and well-being of the elderly have not been fully addressed.

Research has indicated that elderly leisure activities are at present mostly passive and lacking in social interactions (Chou, Chow, & Chi, 2004; Wong, 2009; Zhao & Chen, 2013), such as slow walk and Tai Chi (Chan, 2014). The lack of diversity in terms of leisure patterns provided in open spaces has also reduced the potential of engendering active physical and social lifestyle among the elderly (Chan, 2014).

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