Elderly Environment in Malaysia: Impact of Multiple Built Environment Characteristics

Nik Mastura Nik Mohammad\textsuperscript{a*} and Mohamed Yusoff Abbas\textsuperscript{b}

\textsuperscript{a}Faculty of Architecture, Planning & Surveying, Universiti Teknologi MARA, 40450, Shah Alam, Selangor, Malaysia
\textsuperscript{b}Centre of Behaviour Studies, Faculty of Architecture, Planning & Surveying, Universiti Teknologi MARA, 40450, Shah Alam, Selangor, Malaysia

Abstract

This study explored how elderly people respond to places and felt about their identities by examining their lifestyles, their routes to fulfillment and read images of general environments and family demands. In mid of 1980s, less than 30 percent of the world’s elderly lived in Asia and it will rise to almost 60 percent by 2025 (Longman 2000). Although several studies have been done in the past, most of them were focused on specific aspects of culture differences and their relationship to various aspects. This study explores their personal views and concern about their daily or routine activities. This paper is an effort to discuss their impact of multiple built environment characteristic in Malaysia, with reference to some experiences among selected countries.

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Keywords: elderly; environments; culture; identities and characteristic

1. Introduction

This study is seeking on how older people in general experiences in their daily routine life engage with streets and their concerns in terms of design. Some data of specific design and findings are preliminary study area that to date has been neglected. Older people street design to be familiar, legible, distinctive,
accessible, comfortable and safe. Penang, December 11 – UNDP and the Economic Planning Unit of Penang today announced that Penang will be the first state in Malaysia to conduct a full audit of its public transport facilities as it develops a comprehensive blueprint to improve the ease of access and mobility for persons with disabilities (PWD) by 2010.

1.1. Definition of ageing

Chronological definition of elderly in Malaysia includes people aged 60 years and older. The proportion of elderly in Malaysia is increasing due to significant socioeconomic and demographic transformations (Karim, 1997). The elderly population in the country increased from 5.6% in 1991 to 6.5% in 2002 (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2002). There are various ways by which ageing can be defined. Ageing can be defined as a natural biological process, a pathological process, a psychosocial or a socioeconomic process (Kalk, Baat and Meeuwissen, 1992). The ages of 60 and 65 years have been commonly adopted as the beginning of old age although the definition varies across countries, cultures and time (Sen, 1994). The World Health Organisation (WHO) defines an ageing population as when the elderly population of 65 years and above (65+ years) of a country reaches 7.0% of its total population (WHO, 1989). Malaysia has adopted the United Nations definition of those aged 60 years and above (60+ years) as older persons for ageing is a progressive state, beginning with conception and ending with death, which is associated with physical, social and psychological changes. Of the approximately 580 million elderly people (60 years and above) in the world, around 335 million live in developing countries.

Nowadays, the life expectancy in more than 20 developing countries is 72 years or above (Fahey et al., 2003). Chronological definition of elderly in Malaysia includes people aged 60 years and older. The proportion of elderly in Malaysia is increasing due to significant socioeconomic and demographic transformations (Karim, 1997). The elderly population in the country increased from 5.6% in 1991 to 6.5% in 2002 (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2002). The actual age used in the definition of 'senior citizens' or 'elderly' has differed among researchers and writers. However, the United Nations World Assembly on Ageing held in Vienna, 1982, used '60 years and over' as the cut-off in deliberating ageing trends. Consequently, a Malaysian policy maker has adopted this demarcation and is officially used in planning for senior citizens. This paper has thus used the same age cut-off to refer to senior citizens in Malaysia. The number of senior citizens in Malaysia almost doubled over the twenty years from 1970-1991 from 546 thousand persons in 1970 to 1.03 million persons. The numbers have increased by another 35 per cent over the last 10 years to 1.4 million persons or 6.3 per cent of the total population in 2000. Based on population projections, the number of senior citizens is likely to more than double to 3.4 million in the next twenty years. The proportion of elderly Malaysians will grow from 6.3 per cent in 2000 to 12.0 percent or 4.9 million persons by the year 2030, thus doubling in proportion, but more than tripling in numbers over the 30 year period. When growth rates of the total population are compared with growth rates of the population aged 60 years and over, a continual ageing pattern of the population is inevitable, assuming prevailing trends persist.

1.2. Ageing population-Social and Cultural factors

There is a growing interest in the social and cultural meaning of growing old across the world. In the case study of International Labour Organisation report in 2001, approximately 3.8% of Malaysians are in the age group of 65 and above. Even though, the percentage is still small in comparison to other developed regions such as the US and UK, the older population is growing world-wide although the rate of change has been greater in developing countries. In rich industrialized countries such as Japan, the USA, Australia, and Sweden. According to Sjaak van der Geest, University of Amsterdam, the upsurge
of research is linked to the fact that elderly people represent an ever-growing proportion of the population causing the entirely new social, demographic, and economic situations.

Since the world population is rapidly ageing: 1st trend - In 2006, the number of persons aged 60 and older was 650 million; in 2025, the number will be almost double: 1.2 billion people will be 60 and older. In 2007, over half of the global population lives in cities. 2nd trend - Our world is a growing city: by 2030, about three out of five people will live in cities. By 2050, there will be 2 billion people aged 60 and over in the world. Both trends are occurring at a faster rate in developing countries (Source of WHO). To help cities make the most of an ever-growing older population, WHO is releasing the Global Age-friendly Cities Guide on the occasion of the International Day of Older Persons - 1 October 2007. Altogether 35 cities in 22 countries from all continents participated in the study - Istanbul, London, Melbourne, Mexico City, Moscow, Nairobi, New-Delhi, New York, Rio de Janeiro, Shanghai and Tokyo are included along with other cities (Source of WHO). A place with own identity: a healthy environment, safety, attractive, a sense of community.

The above quote perhaps explores broad range of environments and products for routine activities, including grocery stores, subways, malls, bus terminals, pedestrian walkway, and other environments. Many designers became enthusiastic over the ideas by permanently changing their understanding of design implications for this particularly vulnerable group of users by changing their practices to address their needs. The Guide (WHO) is an innovative initiative because: Older people themselves were active participants in the project; they decided what an age-friendly city is. About 1500 older people described the advantages and disadvantages faced in eight areas of city living: (source by WHO).

It proposes easy ways to make a city more age-friendly: affordable measures that can quickly be implemented by any city are explained in the Guide, for example: having affordable transportation costs; providing special customer service arrangements, such as separate queues; holding public events at convenient times; having courteous and helpful service providers promoting and supporting job opportunities for older people; and providing clear information about health and social services. WHO focal point will maintain the leadership, working with multiple partners (including NGOs, government bodies, the academic, and the private sector) to support and guide the development of age-friendly cities based on the Guide (source by WHO).

The simulations will hopefully help them to expand and supplement the design perspectives as we as designer proceed in our career by recognizing several significant health issues related to community design and land use. These issues include:

- **Accessibility**: Poorly designed communities can make it difficult for people with mobility impairments or other disabling conditions to move about in their environment; consequently, people with a disability often are more vulnerable to environmental barriers. Elders’ Health and the Built Environment: Elderly people interact with the built environment in ways that reflect changing lifestyles and changing physical capabilities. After retirement, people have more time to enjoy parks, recreational activities, and other community facilities.

- **Gentrification**: Where people live, work, and play has an impact on their health. Several factors create disparities in a community’s health. Examples include socioeconomic status; land use/the built environment, race/ethnicity, and environmental injustice. In addition, displacement has many health implications that contribute to disparities among special populations, including the poor, women, children, the elderly, and members of racial/ethnic minority groups. (Source from Group of Social Aspect study –Nik, Bei, Gerald and James, Dept. of Landscape Architecture, University of Sheffield 2005).

This paper provides an overview of the differences aspects and trends in Malaysia and focuses on built environment characteristics of the elderly people. As a fast developing nation, by addressing the needs of different categories such as social need groups is vital to balance growth in the nation and therefore,
understanding past, present and future trends among the older population has been an especially growing concern over the last decade or so. The areas of built environment characteristics that have been included in the paper are especially relevant to create awareness as to the pace of planning and stimulation of initiatives necessary for the elderly population in Malaysia.

1.3. Table of Design Concerns

Table 1. The table based on interview and sets of photographs for use the aid for discussion and views. (Conduct in Sheffield 2005)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Design Concerns</th>
<th>Percentage of comments</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Signage</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seats</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level of change</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Smooth surface</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Drop kerb</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Safe crossing</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

2. Literature Review

2.1. Multiple Environments and its Characteristic

Imrie and Kumar (1998) emphasised that ‘no one gives a care about our needs and we feel this every time we go outside,’ explaining how they experience streets in their local neighbourhoods, how often, when and why they use them, and how they feel when they are out. It is a vital for their everyday existence, wellbeing and enjoyment of life. Gant (1997), for example, documents the extent to which pedestrian over recent decades has positively transformed the accessibility of shopping centres for disabled people, but important shortcomings are evident such as the inadequacy of toilet facilities and a lack of clear signposting. Imrie and Kumar (1998), draw upon the accounts of disabled people themselves to demonstrate the extent to which the built environment compounds their experiences of social and economic marginalisation. A common theme in the informants’ accounts was to divide places between those that are safe and secure and those that are harmful and dangerous. It was often the home that was regarded as safe and secure, while the environment beyond the home was often perceived as harmful and dangerous. Humiliation was a frequent experience outside the home, such as having to access buildings by concern of accessibility for older people, disabled people and those with young children (Brewerton and Darton, 1997). Lifetime Homes are homes that meet the needs of most households and the changing needs of households as they grow older. The Joseph Rowntree Foundation identified 16 design features that should be included in new housing take into account of parking space capable of widening to 3300mm. and the distance from the car parking space to front door kept to a minimum. Level of sloping and accessible covered and lit and fully allows wheelchair access and low window-sills and at a convenient height.

2.2. Legibility of Architectural and Design Features

Design features are unobtrusive and easy to incorporate without incurring significant and visually also aesthetically, allow flexibility and the ability to carry on living in them whatever their changes in
circumstances and ability. The streets and neighbourhoods those are easy to use and enjoy throughout a person’s lifetime, whatever their changes in ability and mobility. For people to have a good quality of life in older age they need neighbourhoods as well as homes that they can use and enjoy. Seven (7) design principles, including ‘a place with its own identity’, ‘a place where public and private spaces are clearly distinguished’ and ‘a place with attractive and successful outdoor areas’. Designers are told what a sustainable community should achieve (e.g. access to facilities, a mix of uses, attractiveness, safety, a sense of community and a healthy environment, ODPM, 2003), but what this means in practice is not yet clear. Some specific design guidance is available for particular principles (e.g. ensuring ‘eyes on the street’ to maximise feelings of safety), but much of the guidance is vague and difficult to apply. Higher density housing can take many different forms, not only in terms of internal and external layouts and connections with surrounding areas, but also in terms of architectural style and detail, and arrangements of outdoor space and car parking. By taking seriously, the requirements of older people because of the need to enable independence. Staying put is also usually what people want, and what is best for them, especially to be able to do so, older people need not only homes that meet their needs, but also outdoor environments that they can use and enjoy. They need to be able to get out and about; otherwise they will be effectively trapped inside. As Hall and Imrie (1999, p. 424) state: `The design and development of buildings and the built environment have the capacity to facilitate or to hinder people’s movement and mobility, and particular designs . . . are infused with powers of demarcation and exclusion.’ Many older people live alone – they need to be able to get fresh air, exercise, go to the shops or post office, walk the dog, or meet up with friends. It is vital for their everyday existence, wellbeing and enjoyment of life. Although there have been some advances in designing more accessible neighbourhoods for older people, the work so far has focused on physical or sensory needs rather than cognitive ones, in particular the needs of wheelchair users.

2.3. Impact of Elderly People in Malaysia

The lifespan of Malaysians is increasing. Concomitant with this, the elderly population in Malaysia is also on the increase. In this new era, age should not be a limiting factor in terms of appearance and socialisation for the individual. This also hold true for the elderly. The number and proportion of the elderly in the world is increasing. Population ageing occurs when the elderly population of a country reaches 7% of the total population. The elderly population of Malaysia is projected to increase from 6.4% in the year 2000 to 7.0% in the year 2005, and subsequently to 12.0% in the year 2020. In order to meet the challenges of the ageing phenomenon, the Government of Malaysia formulated and endorsed the National Policy for Senior Citizens in 1995. One of the strategies stated in the policy is enabling the elderly access to health care. In line with this, the Ministry of Health (MOH) established the Majlis Kesihatan Warga Tua (National Council on Health of the Elderly) in 1997, with action plans for provision of health care to the elderly in Malaysia. There is a growing need to consider the implications of ageing in urban design. The study, aimed to find out characteristic and identity of friendly neighbourhoods that enhance and extend the active participation of older people in their local communities.

2.4. Legibility as an Essential Characteristic

Elderly people interact with the built environment in ways that reflect changing lifestyles and changing physical capabilities. After retirement, people have more time to enjoy parks, recreational activities, and other community facilities. Wayfinding (as cues): A huge appreciation of nature such as trees, plants and wildlife among older people. It was obvious on the accompanied walks that many older people notice
these aspects of their environment. There is often an appreciation of buildings and architecture too. Normally older people use their mental map through their familiarity and visible from the outdoor street. Older people use landmarks such as mosque and typical building to find their way around. Social interaction provides many points of contact for older people, not just through planned trips to visit friends and family, but through informal interactions with neighbours on the street, shopkeepers and other people enjoying recreation in parks and other open spaces has been shown for mental health as well as people’s quality of life. The objectives of the study are to investigate how older people interact with the outdoor environment, the nature and quality of their experiences, and their understanding of the outdoor environment. The ability of older people to successfully use the outdoor environment with the guidance at all scales for designing friendly outdoor environments. Forty-five ambulant people aged 60 years or over, living at home or in sheltered accommodation and still using the outdoor environment, participated in the research. By determine their perceptions and use of their local outdoor environment different aspects of the outdoor environment to find out their preferences in terms of design and reasons for liking or disliking particular features also way finding the environmental features that appear to help or hinder them. The design characteristics of participants’ local neighbourhoods were measured in order to find out if they were related to the different quality of life outcomes for participants – for example, to see if those who reported positive feelings when outdoors were more likely to live in particular types of neighbourhood or urban forms of the outdoor environment within people’s local neighbourhoods, including the following: Street network, shape and type; Open space, junctions, materials and kerbs, street/footway widths, and street furniture, including seating and signage.

- a place with its own identity’,
- ‘a place where public and private spaces are clearly distinguished’
- ‘a place with attractive and successful outdoor areas’.

A sustainable community should achieve (e.g. access to facilities, a mix of uses, attractiveness, safety, a sense of community and a healthy environment, ODPM, 2003), but what this means in practice is not yet clear. Some specific design guidance is available for particular principles (e.g. ensuring ‘eyes on the street’ to maximise feelings of safety), but much of the guidance is vague and difficult to apply. Higher density housing can take many different forms, not only in terms of internal and external layouts and connections with surrounding areas, but also in terms of architectural style and detail, and arrangements of outdoor space and car parking. By taking seriously, the requirements of older people because of the need to enable independence. Interest to enable people to stay living in their own homes for as long as possible. Staying put is also usually what people want, and what is best for them, especially to be able to do so, older people need not only homes that meet their needs, but also outdoor environments that they can use and enjoy. They need to be able to get out and about; otherwise they will be effectively trapped inside. Both of the aspects and factors of familiarization of the place can be achieved through architectural and environmental features and clearly visible.

3. Conclusion

Older people and how they appreciate and enjoy of the nature aspects such as trees, plants and wildlife among older people and how they getting ‘feel’ to the place. It was obvious on the accompanied walks that many older people notice these aspects of their environment. Some of older people use trees and planting as cues for ‘way finding’ and how they ‘read’ their street environment. There is often an appreciation of buildings and architecture too. Older people use landmarks such as mosque and typical building to find their way around. Social interaction provides many points of contact for older people, not just through planned trips to visit friends and family, but through informal interactions with neighbors’ on the street, shopkeepers and other people enjoying recreation in parks and other open spaces has been
shown for mental health as well as people’s quality of life. We read very little but the study was based on wholly the studio-based.

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