

Issues Negatively Influencing the Use of Public Outdoor Built Environment by Older Residents of London

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Summary

A case study was conducted with the aim of identifying the physical environmental features negatively influencing the use of public outdoor built environment by the older City of London residents belonging to the Asian and Caribbean ethnic communities. Additionally, the study undertook to recognise the aspects of the social environment having a negative impact on the use of the outdoors. The study was based on two focus group discussions carried out in Acton, a district within the Borough of Ealing in West London. The outcome of the study demonstrates that the main negative physical features of the environment include unclean and damaged pavements and bus shelters, faulty traffic lights at pedestrian crossings, insufficient number of seats along walking routes, inconsistency of bicycle lanes and deficient car parking space. The most important aspects of the social environment reported as negative in relation to the use of the outdoors are crime, the lack of respect for pedestrians by drivers and the inadequate provision by the Council for pest control and rubbish collection as well as the scarce support in organising collective outdoor activities through the local community centres.

Keywords

Older People, Public Outdoor Built Environment

Introduction

Two years ago, a consortium of three academic research centres based in the UK was awarded funding by the Engineering and Physical Sciences Research Council (EPSRC) to carry out a research project with the aim of identifying issues negatively affecting the use of the public outdoor built environment by the older people of various ethnic and cultural backgrounds living in residential settings of diverse types across the UK. As the final outcome of the project, the consortium is expected to propose a set of recommendations as to how the quality of life for the older people could be improved by enhancing the quality of the environment. The project, entitled Inclusive Design for Getting Outdoors (I'DGO) (Ward-Thompson, Burton and Newton, 2002; Garaj, Newton and Ormerod, 2003), is planned to be completed by October 2006. The funding for the project, in excess of £500,000, was awarded under the EPSRC's Extending Quality Life (EQUAL) research funding programme. The consortium members are the Open Space Research Centre for Inclusive Access to Outdoor Environments based at the Edinburgh School of Art and the Heriot-Watt University, the Oxford Institute for Sustainable Development based at the Oxford Brookes University and the SURFACE Inclusive Design Research Centre based at the University of Salford. Each consortium member is to address a different, yet complementary, set of issues bearing a negative impact on the use of the outdoors by the older population.

The Case Study

This paper presents the outcome of the second stage of the research work undertaken by the SURFACE research team within the initial I'DGO project work package (Ward-Thompson, Burton and Newton, 2002). The research work consisted of a case study aimed at recognising two groups of issues negatively affecting the use of public outdoor built environment by older people living in Greater London: the negative physical features of the environment and the aspects of the social environment negatively affecting the use of the outdoors. The case study comprised two focus group discussions with the older residents of Acton, a typical urban area within the Borough of Ealing in West London (The Council of the London Borough of Ealing, 2004). One focus group discussion involved participants belonging to the Asian community whereas the participants in the other discussion were from the Caribbean community.

The study reported in this paper complements the previous research work conducted by the SURFACE research team, which involved the exploration of the above issues in the context of a typical suburban UK residential setting. The previous work, belonging to the first stage of the initial I'DGO work package, included a case study consisting of a series of three focus group discussions that were carried out in Marple, a suburban town located on the outskirts of Manchester. The findings of that study were presented at the "Designing for the 21st Century III" International Conference on Universal Design (D21 III) in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil in December 2004 (Garaj, Newton and Ormerod, 2004).

Location

Acton was chosen as the location to carry out the case study for two reasons. Firstly, it was deemed to be representative of the urban environment in the UK and thus fulfilling the primary objective of the case study, which was to analyse the problems related to the use of the outdoor environment by the older people residing in a typical urban residential setting. The key characteristic that makes Acton a typical urban environment is its location; Acton is located within the metropolitan area of Greater London and fully integrated with other London boroughs. Secondly, because of its population, which is a vibrant mix of people from a variety of ethnic and cultural backgrounds, Acton was a suitable place to recruit for the focus group discussions the older people belonging to ethnic minorities. The involvement in the research of the older people with an ethnic minority background was the secondary objective of the case study.

Participants

The participants in the focus group discussions were all aged 65 years or over and retired at the time when the discussions took place. In terms of the functional status, all the participants were reasonably physically fit and active, regularly undertaking trips outdoors on their own or in a company. As for the living arrangements, all the participants were living on their own or with a partner and/or other family members in a personal accommodation unit, such as a flat or a house, which was either privately owned or provided by the Council. The first group consisted of six female participants, all of which were of Asian origin (either Indian or Pakistani). The second group also involved six participants, four of which were female and two male. All the participants in the second group were of Caribbean origin. The summary of the demographic data for both groups is given in Table 1 below. The participants details presented in this section were reported by the participants themselves in the participant details sheet they completed at the end of the discussion sessions. The focus group participants were recruited with the help of the Priory Community Centre and the United Anglo Caribbean Society, two organisations providing community services for the older residents of Acton.

Table 1: The summary of the focus groups demographic data

Data Type	Group 1	Group 2
Ethnicity	Asian (Indian and Pakistani)	Caribbean
Number of Participants	6	6
Female to Male Ratio	6:0	4:2
Age	All 65 years or over	All 65 years or over

Method

Both discussions in the case study were based on the standard focus group discussion methodology (Gibbs, 1997; Morgan, 1997; Bernard, 1999), which was modified according to the guidelines for running focus group discussions with older people (Quine and Cameron, 1995; Quine, 1998). The modifications took into account the number of participants in a group and the length of discussion. Although the focus group discussions with younger people usually include up to twelve participants, in the case of focus groups involving older people it is recommended that a group does not comprise more than six participants. A smaller number of participants in a focus group enables all the participants to have the opportunity to contribute to the discussion and facilitates interaction between the participants, which is very important in focus group discussions with older people because older people are often less vocal in nature in comparison to younger people. As reported previously in the text, both focus groups in this case study involved six participants. The length of the discussions in the case study was timed so that it did not exceed 90 minutes. This consideration is significant because older people, due to their age and reduced fitness, would most probably become very tired if a discussion lasted for a longer period.

Two researchers were present throughout each of the two discussions; one researcher undertook the function of the discussion moderator whereas the other researcher acted as a scribe. The scribe was taking notes of the key points raised in the discussions. In addition, the discussions were recorded using a digital voice recorder. At the beginning of each of the discussions, the moderator explained the discussion goal to the participants. The given goal was, in terms of the applied terminology, a simplified version of the overall aim of the case study as presented at the beginning of this paper. Subsequently, the participants were presented with a succession of photographs of different public outdoor built environment scenes in Acton. The photographs were intended to serve as the primary facilitator for the discussion. Following the presentation of the photographs, in order to facilitate the discussion further, the moderator asked the participants a series of questions about their negative experiences with the physical features of the public outdoor built environment as well as with the aspects of the social environment influencing the use of the outdoors. In asking the questions, like in explaining the discussion goal, the moderator used a colloquial language.

Results

Based on the notes taken during the discussions, and the discussion recordings, the analysis was conducted of the discussions content. In the analysis, the main issues raised by the participants in both discussions were summarised and combined. The results of the analysis are given in the two tables below. Table 2 (Page 5) presents the physical features of the public outdoor built environment that the participants experience as negative. Furthermore, the table provides the details of the consequences of the features existence on the use of the environment. For clarity, the features in the table are grouped in the sections by the form of mobility in the context of which they were mentioned, i.e. walking, cycling and driving. In addition, Table 2 contains the section named "Other", which includes the reported features that do not fit into the three mobility categories. Table 3 (Pages 6 and 7) displays the aspects of the social environment that the participants mentioned as having a negative impact on the use of the outdoors. In order to enable the reader to visualise and thus gain better understanding of some of the features reported in the discussions, the features were

photographed following the completion of the discussions; the photographs are provided in Table 4 (Pages 8 and 9).

Table 2: The negative physical features of the public outdoor built environment and the consequences of the features on the use of the environment

Features Affecting Walking
Uneven and cracked pavements pose a danger of tripping over and falling (See Figure 1, Table 4)
Traffic lights at road crossings are often faulty, which makes crossing roads either impossible or very dangerous
Low level of cleanliness of pavements and footpaths causes both a practical inconvenience and a visual discomfort; pavements are frequently polluted by vomit, fouling by dogs and various rubbish
Insufficient number of seats on the streets makes it difficult to rest during a walk
Features Affecting Cycling
The inconsistency and absence of bike lanes makes it difficult to ride a bike in the area; biking alongside roads is impossible because of the parked cars; the only feasible way of riding a bike is riding along pavements, which is dangerous because in doing so there is a risk of collision with the passing-by pedestrians
Inadequate provision of bike sheds and bike stands makes it difficult to park a bike and secure it in the public space (See Figure 2, Table 4)
Features Affecting Driving
Inappropriate urban planning has resulted in overcrowding the area with newly built residential properties without allocated car parking space of sufficient capacity; the residents of these properties are therefore forced to park their cars on the road, which makes the roads in the area constantly congested by the parked cars; the congestion, due to the subsequent narrowing of the road, causes complications in driving through the area; in addition, it is very difficult to ride a bike alongside the road or find anywhere to park a car (See Figure 3, Table 4)
Other
The glass windows on the bus shelters are often broken by vandals and left un-repaired for a long period; if the windows are broken, there is nothing to protect the people waiting for a bus from the rain, which is very inconvenient in practical terms; moreover, the bus shelters are not being cleaned frequently enough; the dirtiness of the shelters causes a visual discomfort as well as it is impractical; for example, people cannot sit down whilst waiting for a bus if the seats in the bus shelter are dirty

Table 3: The aspects of the social environment negatively influencing the use of the outdoors

Dogs being walked by their owners unleashed on the streets and in the parks are a source of fear because there is a possibility that they may attack people passing by
Drivers do not respect pedestrians and usually do not stop to let people cross the road at the road crossings without traffic lights, which makes crossing the road at such crossings very difficult and dangerous
High incidence of mugging in the parks scares people off using the parks for the purpose of sitting down and relaxing; the parks should be policed better than they are at present
The fear of crime prevents people of going anywhere outdoors in general, especially at night time; the fear is often incurred by idle youngsters spending time on the street
The cars left parked on the street often get burgled
Vandalism and antisocial behaviour; a female participant reported someone once setting the entrance door to her house on fire
Not having a helper in carrying shopping bags makes going shopping difficult; such assistance should be provided by the Council, for example, on the once-a-week basis
Inadequate financial support by the Council for conducting the community centre activities such as picnics in the neighbourhood parks, one-day trips to the places like the beach in Brighton, half-day sightseeing trips around London and visits to other community centres in London for the purpose of participating in, for example, domino competitions; these are the activities that the community centre attendees enjoy very much but cannot pursue them often because of the lack of funds; the community centre does not have sufficient funds to sponsor the activities in full and the attendees cannot afford to contribute to the cost of the activities themselves more frequently than once or twice a year; the greatest cost in running such activities is the cost of hiring the means of transportation, for example, a mini-bus or a coach; therefore, it would be very helpful if the Council could make a one-off donation to the community centre for the purpose of a mini-bus purchase; in the centre, there are people who used to be bus drivers and who would drive the mini-bus for free
The use of the dial-a-ride service available in the area is restricted to transporting people to the community centre only; the dial-a-ride service should be expanded so that the people can use it to take them to shopping trips, visits to medical centre and recreational facilities, such as the local swimming pool, which they would like to attend but cannot, because, at present, they do not have the means of getting there
Inadequate and irregular provision by the Council for the collection of big pieces of rubbish, such as old furniture, kitchen appliances and TV sets forces people to dispose such rubbish secretly on the streets and in alleyways; the disposed rubbish usually remains where it was disposed for a long time making the environment untidy; big pieces of rubbish are not being collected by the regular rubbish collection services (See Figure 4, Table 4)
Table 3 continues on the following page

The continuation of Table 3

Inadequate pest control by the Council has resulted in a large number of rats living in the area; amongst other things, the rats are attracted by the rubbish left behind by rubbish collectors who do not do their job properly; the residents normally leave the rubbish bags outside their houses for the morning collection (See Figure 5, Table 4); when collecting the rubbish bags, the rubbish collectors usually drop some of the rubbish out of the bags and leave it on the street without cleaning it; this remaining rubbish attracts the rats and, in addition, foxes, a number of which are also present in the area; the rats and foxes are a health hazard and the rubbish collectors should be warned to clean up the left rubbish because this would help reducing the number of pests in the area

Streets, especially those in the residential areas, are not sufficiently decorated during festivities such as the Christmas; the Council should provide more street decorations on such occasions

Inappropriate urban planning, which allows for the new residential properties to be built on the local greens, resulted in the serious reduction of the recreational green space in the area

Not having a helper in maintaining the garden makes it difficult to keep the garden in order and, consequently, has a negative influence on the visual appearance of the garden; the Council should provide regular assistance to the older residents in, for example, mowing the garden lawn

Table 4: The photographs of several negative environmental features reported in the focus group discussions



Figure 1: An example of cracked pavement



Figure 2: “Nowhere to park a bike”



Figure 3: A street overcrowded by parked cars



Figure 4: An old piece of furniture disposed on the street

Table 4 continues on the following page

The continuation of Table 4



Figure 5: The rubbish from the rubbish bags left behind on the street by rubbish collectors attracts rats and foxes

Conclusion

The case study reported in this paper provided a valuable insight into the negative experiences regarding the use of the public outdoor built environment for a part of the older residents population of the Greater London belonging to the Asian and Caribbean communities. The issues discovered as negatively affecting the use of the outdoors by the older people that participated in the focus group discussions in Acton are doubtlessly also existent in other urban environments across the UK, affecting not only the older people from the Asian and Caribbean communities but also the older population of other ethnic and cultural backgrounds. Addressing and resolving the issues in question at a national level would therefore most probably contribute to improving the quality of life for the older population of the urban UK in general. In addition, it is highly likely that resolving the issues would add to the quality of life for the UK population as a whole.

As the immediate further work on the I'DGO project, the SURFACE research team will carry out one additional case study, which is aimed at identifying the physical environmental features having a negative impact on the use of public outdoor built environment as well as the aspects of the social environment negatively influencing the use of the outdoors by the older residents of a typical rural residential setting in the UK. The outcomes of this future study shall complement the findings of the study presented in this paper, and those presented at the D21 III conference, thus enabling the fulfillment of the I'DGO project goal to gain the understanding of the issues having negative effects on the use of the outdoors by the older people with a variety of backgrounds residing in a range of different types of residential settings in the UK. In the subsequent project work packages, the focus group discussions localities will be revisited and a series of in-depth interviews with the older residents will be carried out in order to verify and extend the focus group discussions findings. Based on the combined findings of the case studies, and the interviews, a set of recommendations will be proposed on how to improve the quality of life by improving the quality of the public outdoor built environment.

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