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Aging Neighborhood and Social Inclusion - A Case Study

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Abstract. Currently, in Finland approximately one fifth of the population live in the neighborhoods built in the 1960s and 1970s. The built environment is aging, and at the same time the share of the oldest resident cohorts is growing. The neighborhood built environment and social cohesion become important for vulnerable groups, such as older people, who spend a lot of their time at home and in the surroundings. Urban densification and renewal of the old neighborhoods need to take into consideration the local population structure, their needs for the physical and social environment. This paper presents an ongoing case study. The objective was to recognize the meaningful spaces for inclusive social activities in the neighborhood, focusing on aging residents. Qualitative and mixed methods were used to study older people's lived experiences and their relation to the neighborhood. The case study neighborhood is undergoing an important urban development process. A new service hub, with commercial and public services as well as a new metro station, is attracting seniors to move to the area. As most activities are concentrated in the new service hub, access to local services become more difficult for vulnerable groups. The spaces for informal social encounters within the neighborhood are getting fewer and more people of all ages are living in one-person households than previously. To build socially sustainable communities, the integration of all resident groups is important. Successful urban transformation benefits new residents, but also include current residents. The densification and renovation taking into account Universal Design principles can support the vitality, social cohesion, and attractiveness of a neighborhood.

Keywords. Neighborhood design, Inclusion, Older people

1. Introduction

Population ageing is a global trend. According to current population projections, by 2050, all regions in the world will see an increase in the size of the older population. Globally, majority of older population live in the cities. In Europe, the projections show continuation of these trends. UN study shows that Finland has one of the highest economic old-age dependency ratios in Europe. This is defined as the ratio of consumers aged 65 years and older of all people in the working age [1]. Therefore, seniors 65 years old and older, are becoming an important consumer group also in the housing sector. Hasu found, that for seniors, an important housing decision criterion is to have “carefree, safe, and secure everyday life” [2]. In general, older people live in ordinary dwellings, and they have a high degree of residential stability, especially among the oldest age cohorts. However, Andersson et al. found that some housing preferences increase with age [3]. These include for example, location in an area where one feels at home,

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accessible apartment, apartment building with a lift, and dwelling in one floor. Modifications related to the challenges of home environment may improve the autonomy of residents. However, Fernández-Portero et. al argue that to improve the level of residential satisfaction and wellbeing of older people modification to home as well as building, community, and district are needed [4]. Universal Design is one of the tools to make the built environment adaptable for all residents.

Older people may have different responses to cope with housing environment that does not support them. They may accommodate and tolerate unpleasant housing situations, they can try to actively change or modify their home, or relocate [5]. When people choose to relocate, they often try to find a suitable apartment in the familiar neighborhood, if available. The choice of a dwelling depends on the household's preferences and resources as well as the supply within the housing market. According to Hasu the residents adjust their housing preference ratings based on the existing supply [2]. Studies indicate that older people prefer apartments in the city centers or subcenters within walking distance from services [6].

Single-person households are getting common in all age groups. The increasing number of people living longer and alone may imply the likelihood of unwanted social isolation. Easy access, low threshold spaces in the neighborhood that encourage interaction and social activities between residents become important. Mazumdar et al. reported a strong relationship between social capital and the overall built environment as well as the access and walkability to local destinations such as libraries [7]. They point out, that enhancing social capital could be used at various scales when designing and retrofitting neighborhoods. According to Cramm et al. the quality of neighborhood services, neighborhood social capital, and social cohesion are significantly and independently associated with wellbeing of older adults [8]. They observed that neighborhood services, and social cohesion may act as buffer against the negative effects of living alone for low-income older people. The access to affordable apartments, to services that older people value, and to public transport are major factors affecting the quality of life of older residents [9].

2. Background

In Finland, the 1970s were a period of urbanization and suburban housing mass production. It was the peak period for the government subsidize housing construction. The new suburban neighborhoods for young families were realized often on the outskirts of cities [10]. The production was aiming at efficient and low-cost industrial housing production, realized often with three to four level concrete apartment buildings made of prefabricated elements. Currently, approximately one million Finns out of 5.6 million live in these suburban neighborhoods. The urban environment and apartment buildings need deep renovations and adjustment to current living standards. Moreover, the household composition and age profile of the residents have changed. The family-intensive areas have become one to two-person households with increasingly ageing population. Older residents are generally less mobile and more dependent on the immediate living environment. Therefore, they are expected to have a relatively large proportion of their social network living in the surroundings. The safety, walkability, and accessibility of the built environment support this resident group.

Mehta and Bossom identified coffee shops, restaurants, community centers, and local shops as third places [11]. They consider third places as comfortable places outside

home and work environment to meet old friends and make new ones. They observed that the third places were different for different resident groups. This was related e.g. to the duration of stay in the neighborhood, and age. Gardner identified third places (parks, coffees, etc.), threshold spaces (elevators, entrances etc.) as well as transitory zones (bus stops, pedestrian sidewalks) important for older people [12]. These represent *inclusive spaces* where older residents may have the sense of ownership and belonging. The social interaction enhances neighborhood cohesion, mutual respect, and support between residents, which may in return protect against frailty of the older people [8]. This paper presents a qualitative study on older resident's perception of their own living environment in a neighborhood undergoing densification and renewal process. The case study is carried out in Helsinki metropolitan area, Finland.

3. Aim

This study is part of an ongoing larger research project on sustainable suburban renewal. The overall aim is to recognize the identities and qualities in old suburban neighborhoods for the residents. The objective of this paper is to make a descriptive analysis of the meaningful and important spaces for inclusive social activities in the neighborhood. This paper focuses on older residents. The research questions were what spaces in the neighborhood older people value for social activities, and how does the neighborhood development affect the residential satisfaction, access to local services and social activities.

4. Method

Qualitative and mixed methods were used to study the older people's relation to their neighborhood. According to Sousa qualitative research approaches are exploratory and interpretative, aiming at growing understanding and knowledge [13]. Three workshops, one walk-through with residents and an online questionnaire were used to study older residents' experiences of their neighborhood (Table 1.). The study was using purposeful sampling of seniors and older people living in the case study area. They were information-rich sample for the study topic [14]. The workshop participants were volunteers, recruited through local residential association and a non-profit association. Two workshops were held in the local Neighborhood House run by a non-profit association, one was organized outdoors due to Covid 19 restrictions. Some of the participants took part both to workshops and walkthrough. One of the workshops (Workshop 1) was organized together with older people and multicultural residents in working age (4 participants).

Table 1. Participants in the study

	Male	Female	Total
Questionnaire	17	41	58
Workshop 1	7	4	11
Workshop 2	1	7	8
Workshop 3	5	7	12
Walk-through	2	6	8

5. Case study area

5.1. The housing and households

The case study area is located in the Helsinki Metropolitan area. The housing development in the neighborhood had its peak during the 1970s. Within ten years as many as 16 500 new inhabitants moved to the area [15]. Up to 80 % of the apartment buildings from the 1970s have no lifts. Between 1980 and 2000 there has been only a moderate growth. (Figure 1.) Majority of the apartment buildings built before 2000 are low rise apartment buildings with less than four floors without a lift. In the end of year 2018, almost half of the dwellings were one to two room apartments (48.6 %) [16].

In the last decade, a new development phase with a service hub (a shopping and service center, opened in year 2001) and the new metro line (year 2017) have led also to heavy densification of the neighborhood. This has rapidly transformed the area, which remains a residential area with a majority of apartment buildings (75.5 %). New high-rise apartment buildings built after 2010 have lifts and accessible apartments.

Still in 1980, more than half of the households were families with children (average household size 2.6 persons) [17]. Currently, one person households represent 42.5 % of all households and 75 % of households are one to two person households. These include couples and single parent households. The population is ageing and especially the oldest age cohort has been increasing. In 2018, approximately 16.8 % of residents were seniors and older people 65 years old and older. The share of the oldest age cohort is projected to increase in the coming years [16].

6. Results of user participation

6.1. The resident-participants

Majority of participants in this study were seniors and older people living in the case study area. They were recruited through local senior associations. An online survey was published on the local neighborhood association homepage. The respondents to the questionnaire (N=58) were in majority 55 years old and older (63 %) and female (69 %). They reported to have been living in the area in average 20 years (from 6 months to 50 years). The mean housing history of respondents in the area was 15 years. The self-reported reasons for moving to the area were good transport connections, and affordable housing. As one of the respondents expressed to have found “*a suitable apartment at affordable price in a suitable place*”. Another explained to have “*downsized and moved closer to services*”. Nine older respondents to the questionnaire, and many workshop participants had been living in the area their whole adulthood, since 1970s. Not all of them were willing to relocate, even if their current apartment did not support their daily coping. As one older person participating in the workshop reported to be living on the fourth floor of an apartment building with accessibility issues and no lift. “*They say I should move, but it is not that easy. I’m so used to live in this neighbourhood... I’m not leaving anywhere, all these places and all people*”.

6.2. Housing provision

The views about current housing provision in the neighborhood were mixed. Residents appreciated the low density and greenery of the old part of the neighborhood. However, the low-rise apartment buildings were not accessible due to lack of lifts. The residents' association had made an initiative on age-friendly housing modifications for the municipality. Today, the apartment buildings and the real estate is owned by the Residential condominiums. Therefore, the decisions for the modifications and funding must be done by the owners of the apartment buildings, in this case, the residents themselves. This may be a challenge for many low-income senior residents. Moreover, oldest age cohorts may have less resources of strength than younger age groups to carry out and go through the heavy renovation period. The municipality may, however, facilitate, guide, and encourage accessibility renovations and give information on subsidies for building retrofitting lifts to apartment buildings.

The new high rise apartment buildings built after year 2010 have been realized with current accessibility standards. However, the new housing stock raised a lot of discussion; many participants considered the new development too dense and deteriorating the quality of the urban environment. Some residents found the new apartments too small, and apartment buildings lacking communal spaces for residents. The again, one of the participants found a small apartment suitable for his lifestyle: *“Me and my partner spend all our spare time together, but we have our own apartments, and it works well for us”*. Affordability of the new apartments was also discussed and one of the participants argued that there are little housing choices for seniors: *“A retired person like me, with low pension and no car has little housing choices. We have no other choice than to live in a small apartment close to services.”* The residents reported a considerable rise on rents and real estate values in the area. The new housing developments are not affordable to all.

6.3. Local services

The neighborhood transformation has both positive and negative outcomes for the older residents. Due to the urban transformation the local services, transport network, and spaces for social interaction are changing. In majority, older residents were reporting to be satisfied with the local services and considered that the service hub has led to improved access to services and to a wider selection of services. Further discussions revealed that the new shopping center, metro line and good public transportation had also been attracting seniors to move into the area. However, the residents had observed that small retail shops moved away from the area. They were concerned about the concentration of all local services to the service hub, which has decreased the access to the services and possibilities to social activities for those frail residents living far from it. Moreover, some older residents had negative experience of the premises, considered the shopping center too large and navigation in the premises difficult.

Similarly, older residents had mixed feelings about the construction of the new swimming hall, opened in 2022. Residents were happy of the new premises, but on the other hand, some of them had the fear of losing a small swimming pool at walking distance from their home. Earlier studies show a strong relationship between social capital and the overall built environment as well as the access and walkability to local destinations [7]. One of the workshop participants reported to have been using the

swimming pool for the last 30 years, twice a week. She went there for swimming, sauna, and meeting friends. These local services are spaces for social interaction.

6.4. Social environment

Many of the senior participants had a long housing history in the area. They had friends or family members living in the area. However, 12 respondents out of 58 reported that they had no family, relatives, nor friends in the area. The lack of affordable or free spaces for informal social activities for adults, youth and children were pointed out during the study. Residents were proposing “*a neighborhood house, where adults could meet, chat and play e.g., board games.*” The current facilities for social activities are targeted to different user groups. a) The community center managed by the municipality has activities after school hours (from 14.00 to 22.00) mainly targeted for the youth. b) The Neighborhood house is run by a non-profit association. The low-threshold open access meeting place is open at weekdays from 10.00 to 15.00. The activities focus on multicultural and multigenerational integration. Other organizations can rent the premises in the evenings and weekends. c) The playground with an open communal space is targeted to families and children, and it is open at weekdays from 8.00 to 16.00. Extending the opening hours of these places in the evenings and weekends may have a positive impact for social cohesion.

Moreover, developing more spaces for informal social activities across generations could facilitate the building of the neighborhood social cohesion. Currently, there are only few “third places”, informal spaces for social activities in the neighborhood. The engagement in social activities of young working age men (20 to 55 years old) in the area is low [18]. The workshop participants were concerned that in the long term, current heavy densification, and lack of third places can lead to social frictions in the area. Therefore, they proposed that the municipality would require private developers and big companies operating in the area to provide for the spaces and means for social activities locally. Moreover, one of the workshop participants made the remark, that the history and stories of neighborhood would increase the residential attachment to place, “*We are lacking the stories; who has lived here, what was there earlier? Losing the history of the place can lead to degradation*”. Similarly, the historical layers in the built environment were appreciated.

6.5. Green environment

Access to green environment is one of the most important aspects of age-friendly communities [19]. There is a lot of evidence that nature promotes physical and social activities as well as general wellbeing. In most of the responses, the proximity of the sea was mentioned as the favorite aspect of the neighborhood. The distance between the neighborhood center and the shoreline was approximately 2 km. The nearest public transport stop to the shoreline was approximately 300 m walking distance, which may be challenging for the frailest. The quality and accessibility of the walking paths were raised up in the discussions, and the resident found that the full potential of the waterfront area was not used. They wished accessibility improvements and more activities during the summer. The Nordic climate may limit the use of parks and green areas for social activities in the winter. However, in the summer, some organized community events take place in the playground area and other open green area.

Versatile nature, walking paths and parks were considered as the strength of the neighborhood. The areas of development proposed by the residents were nearly all related to the quality and maintenance of the green areas. Moreover, residents wished more sheltered sitting places and activities in them. The densification, however, had affected the green environment. *“The little trees we had are cut down”*. The residents with long housing history in the area described, how the forest, where they had been picking blue berries in the autumn and enjoyed skiing in the winter was replaced by the service hub. In oldest part of the neighborhood, with low density, the large inner court yards were still green with old trees. These court yards were semi-private areas, targeted to the residents only. However, they were places to spend time in and socialize with neighbors. The public green areas and parks were few in the area. Many of the new apartment buildings were lacking the green yards which were considered a potential space for social activities.

7. Discussion

The residential satisfaction is found to be related to the neighborhood characteristics. Hanibuchi et al found that residents who lived in older neighborhoods tended to report higher social capital than those who lived in newly developed neighborhoods [20]. They argue that the old *“neighborhoods, not only the residents with long residency, are embedded within wider historical and geographical contexts, that should be taken into account in the social capital”*. The densification of existing neighborhoods should be carried out with the understanding of local community. Successful regeneration is about making neighborhoods good places to live in for all city residents. To build socially sustainable communities, the integration of all resident groups in planning is important. The older participants in this study pointed out the need for user knowledge and grass-root democracy in neighborhood planning.

In the Helsinki metropolitan area, approximately 93 % of population 75 years old and older live at home. One third of them have challenges in mobility and daily activities. Oswald and Rowles observed that in addition to personal factors, voluntary moves of older people are related mostly to the quality of physical environment [21]. The proximity of services, good public transport connections, green environment and the affordability of housing are among the pull factors of old neighborhoods. The strengths of these neighborhoods should be better understood. The mixed land use, green environment and sustainable transport are pull factors and a great potential for the sustainable development.

The new urban developments should also increase possibilities to access social activities outdoors or indoors. The neighborhood design can increase the possibilities of physical and social activities of the frailest resident groups. A Finnish study show that approximately 30 % of the population 75 years old and older have great difficulties walking 500 m or more [22]. Universal Design of formal and informal meeting places in the neighborhood may enhance social cohesion. Noon and Ayalon argue that older people use urban spaces to spend time in them [23]. They represent the opportunity to extend their social life beyond their home and engage to informal social activity (passive or active). Therefore, the open urban places should be developed accessible and comfortable for the long-term stay of older adults. These spaces are important for people who are not willing to engage in organized activities. For all resident groups, the nature and access to the green areas was important factor for the residential satisfaction. The

extension of local events and services to public outdoor environment may enhance the vitality of the neighborhood and encourage social activities and enhance social activities across generations.

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