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Older Adults & Pandemic-Friendly Open Space Needs: A Post Pandemic Analysis

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Issue

The COVID-19 pandemic sparked conversations about ways in which vulnerable groups — such as older adults — could safely gather in public. Providing adequate outdoor spaces for older adults, who face a higher risk of social isolation, has been linked to positive health outcomes in seniors (defined as those aged 65+). Despite documented benefits, older adults remain one of the most underserved groups when it comes to physical activity and open space use.

What barriers do older adults face in accessing open spaces? Most literature has been published prior to COVID-19, and does not mention the limitations and barriers associated with a pandemic-stricken era. As such, the needs and preferences of seniors regarding open space in general are relatively unknown, especially about their preferences regarding the built environment, such as walkable streets and proximity to parks. This brevity of research is accompanied by the lack of recreational facilities that are designed with the needs of older adults in mind.

Using an online survey, social media scan, and site visits to frequently utilized open spaces, the researcher examined the barriers to open space use during the pandemic, and focused in particular on sentiments that local residents had about open space availability.

Study Approach

The mixed-methodology study combined case studies with a spatial analysis of East San Gabriel Valley in Los Angeles County, a literature review of the history of open spaces pertaining to older adults, and an analysis of two study sites: Hacienda Heights and Rowland Heights. A macro-level zoning analysis of open space accessibility listed the two study sites as regions that lack sufficient recreational space and consist

of a large older adult population. The researcher administered an online survey to residents in order to evaluate open space utilization by older adults. The researcher also gathered qualitative data from major social media outlets (Twitter, Facebook, Google Reviews), and visited open spaces (parks, parklets, plazas, open green spaces) to understand open space use during the pandemic.

Key Findings

- » Older residents living far away from traditional forms of open space lack opportunities to engage in physical outdoor activities (see Figure 1).
- » Older residents perceive natural vegetation, outdoor recreation, and seating availability to be key indicators of a “welcoming” open spaces.
- » Open spaces were more likely to be used regularly by older adults if they were properly maintained and secure (both in the form of guards and better gates cameras/lighting).
- » Plazas and vacant lots are not normally perceived and utilized for open space activities.
- » Older residents expressed overwhelming favor in addressing shade disparity.

Recommendations

New open space developments should consider six older adult-friendly design elements.

- » **CONTROL:** High perceived control in older adults is associated with better health and overall psychological well being, and has been found to affect the behavior of older adults in open spaces. Providing signage in multiple

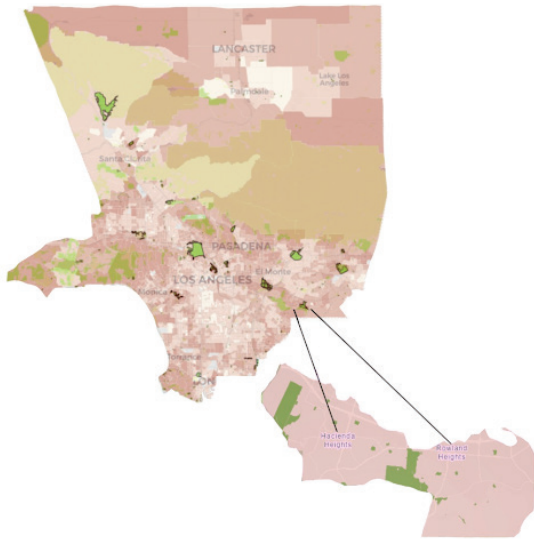


Figure 1.

The number of open spaces (green) and population aged 65+ (with dark red being most dense) in Los Angeles County, situating Rowland Heights and Hacienda Heights, with most open spaces clustered around the west region (bottom right) of each respective area.

languages may provide a clear sense of orientation, and multipurpose amenities, such as benches for sitting/ socializing resting and paths for walking/running, are also recommended.

- » **SAFETY:** Design safe open spaces that foster interaction, instead of social isolation, to encourage greater use. Providing signs that indicate safety measures, such as when benches were last disinfected, may enhance use of public furniture, restrooms, and benches.
- » **ACCESS:** Open spaces should be placed in areas already well traveled by older adults, such as churches, community centers, and grocery plazas.
- » **SOCIAL SUPPORT:** Most older adults prefer traveling in groups of two, suggesting the importance of social support. Implementing “foils of conversation” such as greenery, birdhouses, and infrastructure — such as exercise equipment, benches that face each other — may provide ways for social interaction.
- » **BIOPHILIC DESIGN:** Designing spaces with more vegetation and flowers (“softscapes”) over concrete

pavements (“hardscapes”) will serve older adults — who benefit from more greenery and natural features.

- » **ACTIVE RECREATION:** A major motivation facing open space use is active recreation, with walking being the most common type of exercise; open spaces should consider designs with walking paths.

The design elements illustrate how even small actions can transform spaces into senior-friendly environments. Future research should explore residents’ impressions and utilization of open spaces transformed from vacant lots and plaza spaces. While surveys are useful, the findings require further investigation. For example, researchers could explore whether owners of commercial and vacant properties are receptive to allocating land for open spaces that are backed by community investments. A better understanding of community perspectives can help planners and policymakers establish and implement open space standards that meet the needs of the community.

For More Information

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