

Traditional Japanese Shopping Streets as Aging-friendly Place: Perspectives from Tokyo, Japan

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Abstract:

This paper seeks to explore how aging-friendly places take shape from the bottom-up initiatives by the elderly in specific urban context. As the world's population is growing older with more people living in cities, it is essential that urban environments are adaptive to active and healthy ageing. Along with top-down governmental efforts, this goal can be achieved via bottom-up approach at local municipality level (as recently promoted by World Health Organization with the age-friendly cities concept) as well as community grass-root level where the elderly creatively improve their living environments to adapt their own needs when they get older. This paper first reviews and discusses about the importance and significance of this bottom-up approach and then focuses on a specific form of place, the traditional Japanese shopping street - often known as shotengai (商店街) in Japanese - as the case study. Basically a shotengai is a street with a concentration of shops and restaurants, usually located near a train station. Specifically, three shotengai in Tokyo are surveyed: Sugamo, Togoshiginza and Kira-Kira Tachibana. The physical survey with rich observation data shows that the shopping streets have very good diversity of services relevant to elderly people's needs, rare nostalgic merchandise for the elderly that can hardly found nearby, barrier free street design, pedestrian zones in designated hours and human-scaled cozy streetscape. Unlike other conventional shopping streets, these shotengai are not only catered for elderly people, but also interestingly managed, run and served mostly by the elderly. Specifically, Togoshiginza also offers services suitable for other particular groups such as women and children and informal roadside dining spaces, while Kira-Kira Tachibana caters services for tourists as well. More insightfully, the street interview survey reveals how often do elderly people come to these places, what kind of particular services and/or attractions the elderly look for and why not elsewhere (e.g. a holy shrine in the case of Sugamo shotengai), what and how some of the initiatives have been done by the elderly, what are their views toward active aging and age-friendly place making, etc. From these case studies, the paper proves that the elderly can be very creative in making their environments more age-friendly given their specific contexts and constraints, and ultimately argues that cities can make their own ways of making them as age-friendly cities.

Keywords: Aging-friendly place, active ageing, Japanese shopping street, shotengai, Tokyo

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