

Qualitative Evaluation of the Potentials of Mashhad To become an Age-Friendly City

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Abstract

Aging is a normal part of all humans' life, but is often associated with negative attitudes. Generally people have no desire to step into this period of life. The objective of this paper is to investigate the potentials of Mashhad as the second religious metropolis of Iran to have become an age-friendly city. The research method is qualitative, so 14 semi-structured interviews were conducted with urban managers using snowball sampling technique-saturation method. In this regard, to review the current situation and the measures taken in Mashhad, challenges and solutions, the interviewer has used the results of theoretical foundations. And each question was in line with World Health Organization indicators. Interviews were conducted with managers and urban planning custodians in transportation and traffic organization, bus-taxi transportation organization, cultural-recreational organization, parks and green spaces organization of Mashhad municipality and welfare office of Khorasan Razavi. Data were analyzed using theme analysis. In this method code analysis is done based on similar topics. Results showed that most urban managers in all sections except transportation and health services have had the maximum satisfaction with their performance and have evaluated the current status of Mashhad conductive and favorable. And also what the elderly after retirement need more than anything is mental relaxation which is rooted in safety and ease of traffic and standard transport. Finally, solutions in order to improve the overall status of Mashhad are presented.

Keywords: Qualitative Analyze, Age-Friendly City, Mashhad, Iran

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Introduction

Today, medical and technological advances have resulted in extension of life expectancy. This leads to more people reaching older ages (Qeisarian, 2009). A clear evidence of this claim is the figure of life expectancy which was 50 years in 1950 and now it is nearly 70 years in the world (Zahedi Asl, 2010). Almost all countries have passed a period of high fertility or are in transition from, naturally, more people than ever at the same time reaching to aging period (Harooni, Hasanzadeh, Salahshoory, Poorhaji, & Mostafavi, 2013). Thus, in communities number of elderly people is increasing and the pyramid of population is going to be aging. Population aging and social-economic problems arising from that point, have pushed countries to explore different solutions (Ibid). It seems that elderly people, due to the limitation of their abilities and being inside vulnerable groups in the society - should be under special support and their needs in physical, social and psychological dimensions should be assessed warily (Amini, Dowlatshahi, Dadkhah, & Lotfi, 2014).

Cities are built to live in and feel comfortable. Cities are the place of culture and so they are unique drivers of people's cultural life. If the city be designed efficiently and develop healthy, a sense of security and calm, emotional and social belonging occurs in people (Naqizadeh, 2011). "Healthy City" is a city where continuous physical development and optimal use of existing resources and facilities provide an environment in which people support each other and the community participation in all matters of life, maximize their abilities (Ziari & Janbabanejad, 2009). In other hand healthy city is a city for all, which make sense of peace for all citizens and consider the needs of all people such as the disabled, the elderly, children, women, so that all citizens groups can benefit from their minimum rights in the city. Every day the number of cities in developed or developing countries that are trying to build standard urban environment, improve physical and emotional relaxation of their seniors will be added (Amirsadri & Soleimani, 2005). So Iran and its' metropolises are not an exception.

In Iran by a population control policy in 1990, the proportion of people under 15 years old gradually decreased and the proportion of middle-aged (15-64 years) have been soared (Amirsadri & Soleimani, 2005). World Health Organization with "Global Age Cities: A Guide" have defined active aging, population ageing, and the population growth of the elderly in the world, then 8 parameters for age-friendly cities are considered and standards for each indicators are defined (WHO, 2007). The necessity of concentration on this issue in Iran as a developing country and a member of WHO that will face population aging in near future is very significant.

At the moment in Iran the only city that has been approved as an age friendly city by the World Health Organization is Tehran metropolis (Iran Capital). Health general director of Tehran municipality according to different needs of the elderly has noted that the legal bill of the age friendly city in a few basic themes of transport and traffic, architecture and urban development, potential growth of health care, social and cultural activities and attraction of public participation and providing health-medical facilities has been approved and report on implementation of these decisions every six months should be presented to Tehran's city council and to standardize these issues, missions are vested in various municipal units (Tehran city council report, 2015). Therefore Tehran could be a proper model for other metropolises of Iran.

Mashhad as the second religious metropolis of Iran is facing rising population constantly and due to the presence of holy shrine of Imam Reza, it attracts millions of pilgrims from all over the country and the world. Furthermore, the number of immigrating elderly people from other cities to Mashhad in order to

embrace spiritual proximity of Imam Reza and to spend their ending years of their life in this city is increasing (Statistical letter of Mashhad, 2015). Based on the general census of the population in 2015, population growth of people ageing 65 and older in Mashhad has reached to 5.06 % around 140,000 people (Statistical letter of Mashhad, 2015). The aim of this study is to qualitatively evaluate the current status of Mashhad based on age-friendly city dimensions.

Theoretical Consideration

The Aging

Aging is caused by biological, physiology, biochemistry and anatomy changes in body cells. These changes affect cell function over time. Aging is not a simple downhill that all spend it with a similar type. But it is a staircase with disordered railings and some people may go down faster than others (Yektamaram, 2009). Of course it rarely happens that physiological, mental and social aging occur simultaneously, because a person biologically and physically may be considered old, but in terms of psychological sense, is feeling young. On the contrary, it is possible that community urge an individual whom in terms of biological and mental is not elderly, play social role of an elderly (Hesabi & Rafiee, 2011).

Age-Friendly City

Population aging, for all countries which decide to provide the safety and welfare for their growing number of the elderly, is considered to be a real challenge. Therefore, understanding the needs of the elderlies and providing a perfect environment for their welfare is a priority (Shakoei, 1996). Old people have different needs and for this reason in urban and social planning that follow-up in various cities in the world, projects anticipate that their implementation will ensure the requirements of old people to be considered (Naqizadeh, 2011). An appropriate city for seniors in all urban sectors and infrastructures should guarantee special precautions, where in older people should have affordable and appropriate homes and must not have the slightest difficulty in use of urban facilities (Zahedi Asl, 2010). Age - friendly cities include those urban spaces in which distribution of public services are in a way that have the maximum fitness with the needs and limitations of older people. Thus transportation services, telecommunication networks and media communications, buildings and urban design, cultural and sanitary services are available in a way that seniors can benefit from them, without dependency or with minimal help from others (Hesabi & Rafiee, 2011).

Theoretical framework of current research consists of eight parameters including outdoor spaces such as clean environment, green residential area, comfortable seats to rest and availability of shopping centers (Phillipson, Bernard, Phillips, & Ogg, 2001; Tibbalds, 2000; Fobker & Grotz, 2006; WHO, 2007), Buildings and public spaces such as availability of elevators, availability of ramps, public toilets with proper sanitation and availability of mosques (WHO, 2007; Aryanejad, 2011), transportation such as frequent public transport service, priority to seat in public transportation, well-designed transport stations and affordable transport services (Shakoei, 1996; Neal et al., 2006; WHO, 2007), safety and ease of movement such as pavements without hindrance, safe pedestrian crossing and feeling secure in living environment (Fobker & Grotz, 2006; WHO, 2007), cultural-recreational such as free membership in libraries, availability of café/restaurant, availability of sport clubs and sport competitions in parks (Shakoei, 1996; Buffle, Philipson & Schare, 2012), participation and social

communication such as opportunity to participate in different events and activities, affordable local celebrations and activities for older people and employment options after retirement (Hall & Midgley, 2004; WHO, 2007; Kadoya, 2013), social respect such as respectful behavior to seniors by family-grandchildren –society, good and intimate relations between grandchild-grandfather and grandmother (WHO, 2007; Chow & Xue, 2011; Harooni et al., 2013) and health services such as well-distributed health and social services throughout the city, accessible information about health and social services, and priorities for seniors to receive medical services (WHO, 2007; Harooni et al., 2013).

Context of Study

Mashhad is the second religious metropolis of Iran with a population of 2,766,258 people, situated in the northeast of Iran and is in the center of the Khorasan Razavi province. The Holy shrine of Imam Reza, the eighth Imam of Shiah, annually attracts more than 17 million pilgrims to the city (Statistical letter of Mashhad, 2015). Mashhad, in terms of administrative divisions is divided into 13 regions of municipalities.

Research Method

The applied research method is descriptive–survey one. After a literature review a theoretical framework was designed based on WHO parameters and related literature, since the study is based on qualitative method, 14 semi-structured interviews were conducted with urban managers who are custodians to build an age friendly city using snowball sampling technique-saturation method. Snowball sampling technique is a non-probabilistic method and often used in hidden populations which are difficult for researchers to access. In this regard, to review the current situation and the measures taken in Mashhad, challenges and solutions, the interviewer has used the results of theoretical foundations. And each question was in line with World Health Organization indicators. Interviews were conducted with managers and urban planning custodians in transport and traffic organization, bus-taxi transport organization, cultural-recreational organization, parks and green spaces organization of Mashhad municipality and welfare office of Khorasan Razavi. Data were analyzed using theme analysis. In this method code analysis is done based on similar topics and also repetitive contents are eliminated by reviewing findings of each interview. All the contents are explained according to the code of interviewee. Table 1 shows the characteristics of interviewees.

Table 1. Characteristics of interviewees according to snowball sampling method

Code of interviewee	position	Organizations	Activity experience	Length of Interview
#1	Technician	Transportation and Traffic Organization of Mashhad Municipality	7 years	35 min
#2	Chief Executive Officer	Transportation and Traffic Organization of Mashhad Municipality	11 years	50 min
#3	Executive Expert	Transportation and Traffic Organization of Mashhad Municipality	3 years	35 min
#4	Middle Manager of Strategic Studies	Bus Transportation Organization of Mashhad Municipality	4 years	40 min
#5	Executive Expert	Bus Transportation Organization of Mashhad Municipality	2 years	25 min
#6	Middle manager of social-cultural	Taxi Transportation Organization of Mashhad Municipality	18 years	45 min
#7	Technician	Taxi Transportation Organization of Mashhad Municipality	5 years	40 min
#8	Executive Expert	Parks and Green Spaces Organization of	4 years	25 min

		Mashhad Municipality		
#9	Chief Executive Officer	Parks and Green Spaces Organization of Mashhad Municipality	8 years	30 min
#10	Middle manager of social-cultural	Welfare Office of Khorasan Razavi	5 years	45 min
#11	Expert of social worker	Welfare Office of Khorasan Razavi	7 years	50 min
#12	Middle manager of social-cultural	Cultural-Recreational Organization of Mashhad Municipality	11 years	30 min
#13	social-cultural Expert of	Cultural-Recreational Organization of Mashhad Municipality	8 years	35 min
#14	Chief Executive of welfare services	Welfare Office of Khorasan Razavi	4 years	20 min
				Total: 505 min

The result of qualitative interviews (current situation)

This section examines the qualitative results of interviews with experts and urban managers discussed in table 1.

First Axis: indicator of outdoor spaces

Most of the respondents agreed that in the field of beauty and urban open spaces, parks and green spaces, Mashhad is always leading in municipalities across the country, and estimated that the urban open spaces are actually reasonable. One of the interviewees stated that "above anything else, the elderly need open spaces and comfortable benches for getting together and relax. Mashhad municipality increases its efforts each year to improve and beautify the urban environment. Over 9 million flowers are planted every year in Mashhad. Besides, in order to beautify the urban environment, more green space is developed on around the city highways. He added, every year number of parks and gardens in Mashhad are growing and pointed out that since 2012 to 2013, nearly 11 parks are newly established in the city. "(#9).

Another respondent stated, "In order to improve the urban environment and green open spaces, theme parks were planned and designed in Mashhad. Theme parks of knowledge, flowers, animation, miniature, and botanical are among those theme parks that have been on future agenda in Mashhad. He said among these theme parks, those which can bring out vibrancy and vitality in seniors, are flowers and botanical parks, and suggested that the elderly who are interested in flowers and plants can be invited to give suggestions, cooperate and get involved in parks" (#8).

Second axis: Indicator of public and religious buildings and sites

Most interviewees agreed that most public buildings and government agencies follow the standards in construction of elevators, adequate bathrooms, the slope of the track and etc. But it is not integrated. In addition, almost in all 13 localities and regions of Mashhad metropolis, mosques and religious places are available. One respondent stated, "Employment of inspectors to qualify the status of public buildings in terms of inclusion of necessary equipment and standards compliance is necessary, and now it is being done. In addition, consulting engineering organization is asked to execute the appropriate criteria. At the moment, laws passed by Parliament based on failure to provide certificate of completion of work for buildings that have not adhered to the principles of proper construction, are efficient" (#1).

One of the respondents expressed "religion has a strong role among all classes, and especially the ageing people, so in all areas of Mashhad, mosques are available" (#10).

Third Axis: Indicator of transportation

In general, the status of urban transportation was evaluated lower than medium from the perspective of the interviewees. It seems that the city managers also agree the weakness in transportation operation. While some managers and experts have stated that considerable actions have been taken for the elderly – disabled in Mashhad, and these measures are increasing each year; most of them agreed that transportation equipment in Mashhad are related to credit and budget approval. In addition, most managers believed that compared to global cities in developed countries within the EU, we are weak, but Mashhad is leading among municipalities across the country, which owes to the court of Imam Reza. One respondent stated, "Every year, we try to do a lot of actions for people with disabilities and the elderly, such as particular car park stations for seniors" (#2). Two interviewees stated "There are special buses which have lower floors and their height is equal to the platform height which run in BRT lines, but their availability across all bus routes depend on the budget and credit assigned" (#3 & #5). One respondent, said "announcement of bus stops which began in 2012 and was implemented in Mashhad by the end of 2013 along all bus routes, will help citizens and pilgrims find their way and locate their position, especially the older people. He suggested, for the ease of transportation and improvement of elderly welfare, the MAN cards (1This is footnote one) that are used for buses and metro in Mashhad can be merged into MANZELAT cards (2This is footnote one) and given to the elderly" (#4). Two of the interviewees in the field of public transportation and taxis in Mashhad acknowledged "the next step which is designed and going to be implemented is smartization of lightweight vehicles. It is designed to reduce potential communication, collision and conflict between drivers and passengers" (#6 & #7).

Fourth Axis: Indicator of safety and ease of movement

In general, status of safety and ease of movement among the interviewees was considered appropriate. Most of the interviewees agreed that every year since 2005, Mashhad municipality did utmost to put safety and ease of movement for the elderly and handicapped in priority to enhance the overpass on highways and equipping them with escalators to increase safety. One of the interviewees stated that "sidewalks unobstructed projects are done in a number of streets in Mashhad including Moallem and Felestin streets. Extension of such projects in Mashhad are important with preference to the elderly and disabled persons. He suggested that high platforms in highways should be redesigned to prevent movement and to increase the location of a pedestrian crossing in crowded streets" (#3). Another respondent stated "The elderly, due to the movement restrictions, are somehow unable in movement, and they need more facilities. Every year, we do a lot of operational measures, for example, increasing the underpass bridges equipped with elevators which is one of the most important future plans. He added projects to equip overpasses with escalator fairly failed, since the group of elderly and people with mobility problems who were our first preference group, had fear of escalators. Therefore, increasing the lift bridge is undergone." (#1).

Fifth Axis: Indicator of participation and social relations

Community participation and social indicators were assessed medium from the perspective of the managers. Most interviewees agreed that the most vulnerable group of the society are constantly the elderly. Children may appear vulnerable and at risk. But the reality is that some older people may not

be supported by the family and do not receive adequate social and emotional support, so the elderlies are more sensitive and more fragile. One respondent stated, "In most developed countries, skilled elderlies work as volunteers in schools, associations, religious institutions, economic organizations and health care organizations. Volunteering with increased social interaction and mental health promotion is beneficial for older people, doubly it will benefit the community. This will be included in future plans of welfare organization to call for people over 65 years in the field of volunteering and charitable community participation "(#11).

Another respondent stated "In our society, unfortunately the more we try to promote mental tools for elderlies, the more poor cooperation of families fail our plans. He added every year we celebrate to commemorate the international day for the elderlies and other great feasts. But families do not cooperate, or some elderly people are unwilling to participate in such celebrations. Perhaps it is due to the false notion that aging is associated with retreatment and solitude. We always try to enhance the image and dignity of older people in community to this point directed collaboration have been done with IRIB (3This is footnote one). Sometimes the ads are very effective in improving the status of the elderlies (Grandfathers - Grandmothers)"(#10).

Sixth Axis: Indicator of social respect

Indicator of social respect assessed really high in view of all managers and is in a good condition. Fortunately, most respondents agreed that social respect and respect for the elderlies in communities are very bold. In families, children's grandfathers-grandmothers roles and how to form intimate relationships with them are taught as a generational experience. In broad sense, the need to respect the elderly in the community and all public places is a priority, and a special seat is devoted or offered to them in public transportations. One of the interviewees stated that "The exclusion of such seats and this culture is not well-appreciated and nor practical. Many of us at seeing the elderly or person with disability in public transportation, subconsciously leave and turn our seat to him, but when a specific seat is assigned, it is dubious that these seats are sufficient, and a sense of responsibility and philanthropy among others will be weakened. He added that our society is a special. Sometimes people who take a bus avoid paying for it! How can we explain to them that do not sit on these seats which are specified for the elderlies"(#14).

Seventh Axis: Indicator of Culture - Recreational

In the context of cultural-recreational indicator, most interviewees agreed that in spring and occasions of great religious and cultural holidays, Mashhad municipality provides valuable services to citizens and visitors, specifically for the elderlies. One of the interviewees stated, "Cultural Organization of Mashhad Municipality every year presents its cultural-recreational packages to greet spring and Norouz holidays to citizens. Nearly 500 street theatre were held in Mashhad in 2013 during the Norouz. They attracted attention of all classes, especially the seniors, because the aim of these thematic displays was to depict ancient traditions in Mashhad and Iran. The most who welcomed these theatres were older people "(#12). Another respondent stated, "Every year in Mashhad many cultural exhibitions and events are held, and some of them are specifically for the elderlies. In addition, he referred to health-care exhibitions in Mellat Park, and stated that the most effective measures for the elderly were street shows held this year. Due to the 65 percent appreciation of the people and specially the elderlies in 2013, this event is scheduled to be held annually "(#13).

Eight Axis: Health and treatment indicator

From the perspective of most interviewees, health indicator was assessed poor and too far from ideal. One respondent stated, "Unfortunately, the quality of health services for the elderlies, if not called poor, is definitely not ideal. Huge cost of health care and medicine cannot be denied. Despite having been under insurance scheme, some elderlies cannot afford to pay these fees which are sometimes more than a month of their pension salary "(#14). Another respondent stated, "Unfortunately, like other citizens, elderlies also need to wait in long queues to take a turn and no priority is considered for them. He suggested that, certain measures such as priority in taking turns for visiting doctors should be considered for people who are aging, because they are not in a condition to have to wait a long time to receive medical services "(#11).

Conclusion and Recommendation

The world is inclining towards aging and Iran is not an exception. Mashhad, on one hand follow the pattern of the country's population structure, and on the other hand, due to the holy shrine of Imam Reza and immigration and settlement of seniors from other areas of the country, needs more cautious urban planning system. Accordingly, in near future, Mashhad will encounter a large number of the elderlies in the population composition. Managing the aging population and giving response to their physical and psychological needs, first require to identify their real needs and then to plan to meet them in current or future urban projects. This is a fact that senility is a status that as long as we have not experienced, is less understandable. Hence, to identify the physical and psychological needs of the elderly in Mashhad, the current survey was conducted and also urban managers are custodians who know what has been done and what needs to be done. Results showed that most urban managers in all sections except transportation and health services have had the maximum satisfaction with their performance and have evaluated the current status of Mashhad conductive and favorable. As Fobker and Grotz (2006) categorized the life style of elderly people based on age grouping and concluded that proper residential environment for the elderly should make it possible to meet their needs in neighborhood without cars and other means of transport. Effective performances in Mashhad based on World Health Organization theoretical and practical implications include appropriate lighting at night on the streets, comfortable seating in parks, proper maintenance of the facilities, beauty and cleanliness of the city and access to the bus for all city routes. On the other hand, unfortunately managers have acknowledged the lack of spatial justice in service availability in Mashhad municipality regions. And indeed, what the elderly after retirement need more than anything is mental relaxation which is rooted in safety and ease of traffic and standard transport. Managers believed that through building a proper city environment for the elderly, not only an age-friendly city, but also there will be a city for all. The results of age-friendly city project in developed countries may seem different. As age-friendly city project in Halifax site represents a number of age-friendly city features especially for healthy and reasonably active seniors (Keefe & Hattie, 2007). Nevertheless still significant hindrances for seniors can be a challenge in Halifax, such as struggle to find a parking place, dangerous sidewalks, dirty bus stops or lack of enough accessible transportation can make difficulty for elderlies to go out (Keefe & Hattie, 2007). There are also such problems in the current status of Mashhad transportation. McGarry and Morris (2011) stated that Manchester's older residents together with legal, voluntary and independent agencies are trying to improve elderlies' quality of life in Manchester such as health and other inequalities and now Manchester is joined the global network of age-friendly cities. As these projects are reviewed, it should be accepted that the significance of senior's health and good service transportation in Mashhad needs more attention. Despite all shortcomings in Mashhad, relatively desirable situation and the efforts to improve urban open spaces and green city creation should not be

ignored, as Sugiyama, Ward Thompson, and Alves (2009) stated the importance of open spaces and beautiful scenery can be enjoyable for older people. Also Hesabi and Rafiee (2011) evaluated the significance of green and outdoor spaces and its impact on sociability of elderly people. High social respect was one of the significant findings of this study from the perspective of managers, but considering the results, authors infer that based on social evidence the elderly are concerned of their social prestige among citizens and also aspects of modernization and its impact on elder people life styles. In fact most of the elderly due to a slowdown learning and physical problems are less considered. People who are less educated feel fear and disappointed in the race of technology progress and feel backwardness from the technology and its staggering progress and it cause reduction of social respect by their family, children and grandchildren. So it can be concluded that the social evidence (what the authors infer and comprehend based on social behavior) are different from the views of interviewees (what managers believe in). Generally, although current status of Mashhad is non-desirable but the efforts made by various organizations will result in to a better situation in near future and it can be promising.

Priorities and solution offering from the perspective of the Urban Managers:

The main suggestions and recommendations are presented as follows:

1. In the field of urban open spaces and beautiful environment and also participation of the elderly in nature construction of the city, seniors who are capable and interested in planting of greenery in thematic parks can be invited.
2. MAN Cards which are used for public transportation (Bus-Metro) in Mashhad have electronic capability to implement special discount on them for people aged more than 65.
3. Many bus lines do not work optimally in Mashhad and it is necessary to re-design network of pathways because this is just waste-cost and its cost can be allocated to new buses which are more consistent with the standards of transportation.
4. Special taxis and discount cards should be considered for the elderly people.
5. Safety on neighborhood streets should increase, so that seniors can enjoy the convenience of walking alone (This could include increasing overpasses and equipping them with elevators or escalator).
6. Advisory Councils can be established in the city by the presence of the seniors and opportunities should be given to them to present themselves in the community, which means, more than gathering in parks.
7. Priorities for the seniors (such as special line or special priority) in order to receive services should be considered (many seniors cannot wait long periods of time to receive services; it could be in banks or medical clinics).
8. Free membership in all libraries (public or private) for the seniors should be provided.
9. All reasonable medical standard tests should be offered and get to be performed free of charge for the elderly people.
10. In public toilets, in addition to increasing health care measures for the elderlies, appropriate toilets should be provided.
11. In buildings and public places, enough toilets should be prepared.
12. At last what the elderly really need is to be heard. Let's them talk about their pain and discuss about their possible concerns. Nothing is more important than respect to the elderly.

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Footnotes

¹A Credit Rechargeable Card which is used for public transportation (Bus-Metro) in Mashhad.

²A Smart Card awarded to seniors 65 years and older. Based on this card elderlies can benefit from a variety of services with a special discount, such as transportation, theaters, museums, sporting venues, and other urban facilities.

³Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting.