

Effective Space for Promoting Daily Socializing at the Community Facilities for Elderly People in Japan

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Abstract: The rate of population of elderly people in Tokyo Metropolitan area keeps growing and extremely aged society is expected not in the distant future. As the rate of healthy elderly people gets higher, the Tokyo Metropolitan Government has been building more and more community facilities for them such as recreation centers and day centers since 1970's. What should be noted in the contemporary life in Japan is that the traditional way of sitting on "Tatami" mattress still exists together with sitting on chair. As the people get older, more consideration should be given to the mode of sitting physically, psychologically and emotionally. To be successful, how the sitting environment in the community facilities for healthy elderly people is arranged and how that environment is associated with the visitor's activities should be known.

In this study, importance of the environment of the community facilities for the growing number of healthy elderly people that supports their socializing was focused. The way of their sitting at such facilities in Tokyo area and its relationship with social activities were observed. From the observation of the visitors' behavior at 6 facilities, it was found that the highly effective space for daily socializing is the one where the visitors with different purpose can comfortably stay for long time, the space in which the way of sitting can be easily changed, easy to move and inviting open space. This suggests that the creation of an open environment which allows different ways of sitting is required for the successful relation-building of the visitors at the community facilities for elderly people.

Key words: *the elderly (people), community facilities for the elderly, socializing, postures, environment, seating positions*

1. Background and purpose of the study

Typical community facilities for the elderly in Tokyo include elderly welfare centers and recreation centers for the elderly (which are collectively referred to as "community facilities for the elderly"). Taking these matters into account, first consideration should be given on seating positions and movement patterns through detailed studies on the facility visitors' behaviors and consciousness, rather than eliminating tatami or similar rooms where the visitors are encouraged to sit on the floor. If there is any difference in visitors' spending time at the facilities depending on their sitting positions they have to take, the first issue we should address is what kind of seating position environment visitors would prefer at the facilities.

The study surveyed six community facilities for the elderly in Tokyo run by the Tokyo Metropolitan Government to analyze visitors' behaviors, focusing on their seating position environment, behavioral patterns as well as the connection with their staying hours at the facilities. Accordingly, the study aimed to explore the future scenario for the most recommendable seating position environment for the facility users.

2. Study method

Supported by the municipal governments of 23 Tokyo special wards, management and operation status as well as construction specifications of community facilities for the elderly in Tokyo (167 elderly welfare centers and 480 recreation centers for the elderly) were identified and analyzed before picking up subjects. 16 facilities, which are expected to be active taking into account the foundation year, size and average number of visitors, were finally selected for the visit study conducted from June 11 to July 9, 2007.

Facility	ID	MA	TT	SH	HG	TT2
	Imado Elderly Welfare Center	Minami Azabu Welfare Hall	Toyotama Senior Citizen Center	Shiohama Welfare Hall	Hikarigaoka Senior Citizen Center	Elderly Welfare Center

Table 1: Summary of community facilities for the elderly subject to the behavioral study

3. Behavioral study

After classifying the seating position environment of the community facilities for the elderly the visits were made, six facilities were finally selected as the subjects for the behavioral study, which was conducted from August 28 to September 13, 2007. During the study, 1) the visitor's location, furniture used, posture, speaking, behavior were recorded and 2) still photos of major locations were shot to see how time passed, every 15 minutes respectively between 9 o'clock to 17 o'clock each day. In other words, we made records and shot photos 36 times respectively per visitor.

Behavioral study analysis

Characteristics of seating position environment and connection with staying hours

1) **Facility ID:** A larger tatami room, used as the main meeting room of the facility, was equipped with plastic

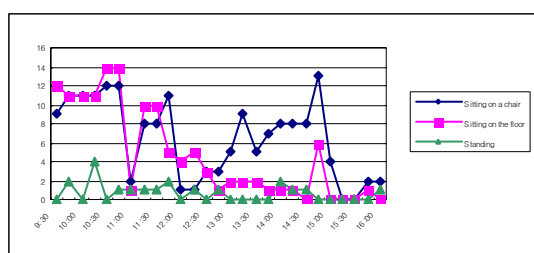


Figure 1: Changes in the number of visitors by time (Facility ID)

benches against the wall, along with some seiza (kneeling) chairs. Some visitors brought their own zaisu chairs for themselves as well. Thus, visitors were able to make themselves comfortable in seating or squatting positions on the floor as they like. It attracted a large number of visitors despite its smaller floor area. Rooms and spaces of the facility seemed occupied uniformly. Most of the seiza chairs

were used as low chairs (in squatting position), rather than for sitting in seiza (sitting straight on knees). The room with the couch was also used for watching TV and smoking. Most of the visitors sat on the floor and changed their postures freely. On the other hand, it was observed that female visitors staying at the main tatami room often changed their postures on plastic benches. Generally, the visitors seemed to change their postures freely anywhere in the facility. Larger percentage of visitors sitting on chairs at Facility ID should be caused by chairs, benches and other gears brought in by visitors themselves and facility personnel.

2) **Facility MA:** The facility had two tatami rooms. A larger room had no chair or other similar furniture. Another smaller tatami room, equipped with tables and steel folded chairs, was used as the Igo room. The room was also equipped with massage chairs and zaisu chairs, which some visitors can use. Extra folded chairs stored in the storage area could also be used at tatami rooms. Except these chairs, visitors in principle had to sit on the

floor at Facility MA. As the facility was a part of a multipurpose building, it had no area to make visitors feel

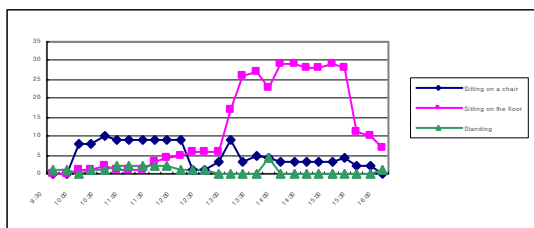


Figure 2: Changes in the number of visitors by time (Facility MA)

enjoyed meals and conversations for socializing as they liked as well as joined other programs at the larger tatami room in the afternoon. It resulted in percentages of visitors sitting on chairs or on the floor changing depending on time zones. In the afternoon, visitors, especially those finishing the activities, are supposed to have some tea and chat freely one another. However, the Facility MA visitors belonged to specific groups, which seemed to stay at specific areas and to be declined to let other groups use their “own” spaces. This might be affected by inconvenient access or mobility within the facility.

3) Facility TT: Built in 2004, the facility was equipped with chairs for all its rooms. Most of the facility area

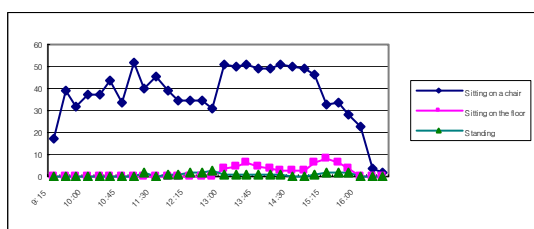


Figure 3: Changes in the number of visitors by time (Facility TT)

including lecture rooms were sectioned into rooms and spaces to be occupied for a variety of programs and other purposes. Visitors were able to stay at the lobby without buying anything at the kiosk. The most important features of the Facility TT were that 1) it was not necessary for visitors to sit on the floor, and 2) all the rooms and spaces were sectioned by purpose without any main meeting room spared. Thus, any visitor sitting on the floor was almost unnoticed. Rooms were sectioned and no entry was allowed during the programs. There was a small number of visitors in the dining room, also equipped a kiosk, in the hall. The facility had no area where visitors could change their seating positions. In principle, there was no space working as the socializing place unless joining the programs. After the programs ended, visitors had little to do.

4) Facility SH: Multipurpose rooms (for table tennis or exhibition) and three tatami rooms were lined up in a

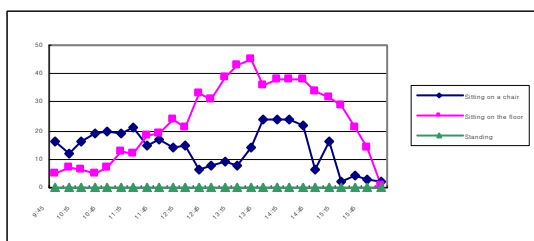


Figure 4: Changes in the number of visitors by time (Facility SH)

row. One of those rooms, equipped with tables and chairs, was used for lectures. Another tatami room exclusively used for Igo was also equipped with tables and chairs available for free layout. Some visitors preferred sitting on the floor while others sitting on chairs. A larger tatami room working as a main meeting room had a couch against the back wall for allowing seating positions. The facility had wide hallways, which were equipped with the couches and massage chairs by the windows as well as bookshelves and TV set. The hallways were efficiently used as the places to provide visitors with seating position environment. It was obviously noted that the visitors joining the programs with chairs prepared went home for lunch while other visitors joining the programs without chairs prepared (e.g. dancing practice and karaoke) brought box lunch or otherwise had lunch within the facility.

Visitors staying at tatami rooms tended to spend longer hours at the facility. They freely and frequently changed their postures between sitting on chairs and on the floor as shown in the photo below.

5) Facility HG: A main meeting room was a western style room, where couches and tables were mostly used by

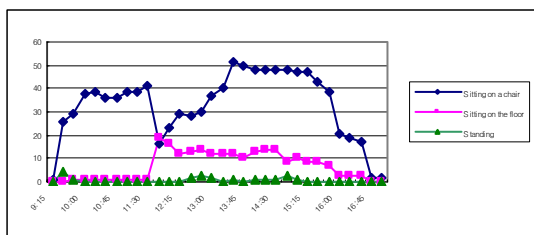


Figure 5: Changes in the number of visitors by time (Facility HG)

the visitors to play Igo. The room was also equipped with a multipurpose recreation table for a variety of games or other recreational activities. Visitors spent their time doing things they thought fun, namely, playing Igo, shogi, reading newspapers and books, just resting, or chatting one another. Easy access to tatami rooms without chairs seemed to be secured.

6) Facility TT2: A larger tatami room on the fourth floor was used as a main meeting place. When playing Igo

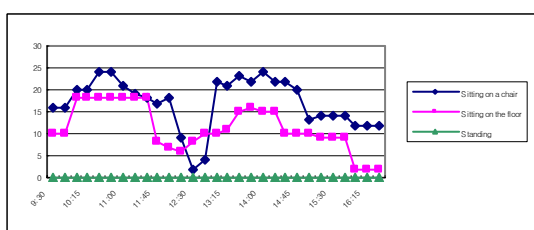


Figure 6: Changes in the number of visitors by time (Facility TT2)

or in other relevant situations, tables and steel folded chairs were available. The facility had the different layout between two floors. The 4th floor comprised of tatami rooms so as to sit on the floor while the fifth floor comprised of western style rooms designed for using tables and chairs. The balance between the floors seemed good at a glance. Actually, the 4th and 5th floor users did not go other floors or communicate each another. It should

be caused by the floor plan and program development scheme. Physical activity programs were conducted at the 5th floor in the western style design. It was found out that behaviors of most of physical exercise equipment users depended on the physical activity program schedule. In other words, they went home immediately after the programs finished without moving to the 4th floor to eat meals or have some tea. The number of visitors on the 5th floor plummeted after lunch. It seemed that no significant effort was made to merge the visitors staying at the 4th and 5th floors for more diverse seating position environment.

4. Conclusions

Reviewing the behavioral study results compared with the floor plans, some examples revealed that the rooms designed for specific purposes (e.g. sitting on the floor or chair) did not sufficiently function as intended and were used for different purposes. Specifically, visitors spent longer time more freely, comfortably and self-sufficiently as well as were able to communicate more effectively one another at the facilities where visitors brought chairs in tatami rooms, adjusted their seating positions with zabuton cushions and made other efforts to make themselves comfortable if they had to sit on the floor. This should be caused by the facility personnel's thorough understanding of satisfying strong needs of visitors for optimal and comfortable seating positions. From now on, for the purpose of promoting socializing among visitors and more diverse usage of facilities, relevant personnel of community facilities for the elderly are required to draw up facility plans, taking into account availability of diverse seating position environment based on actual visitor needs. Further study will be also given for the connection between seating position environment at the facilities and encouraged communications among facility visitors.