Designing Age-Friendly Open Space in Little Tokyo

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INTRODUCTION

Urban open spaces play a critical role in supporting the health, mobility, and social life of older adults. However, many existing spaces fail to meet their needs, limiting accessibility and everyday use.

SIGNIFICANCE

- Older adults make up 23%+ of Little Tokyo Residents

(US Census Bureau ACS, 2024)

- Little Tokyo is located in a priority park area (high park pressure, population growth, limited open space)

(LA Parks Needs Assessment, 2025)

- Poor open space design can lead to less activity and more isolation

THE ISSUE

Many spaces lack:

- Safe pathways
- Adequate shade and seating
- Lighting and amenities

These barriers reduce outdoor activity and increase isolation and health risks amongst aging populations

RESEARCH QUESTION

How can spatial accessibility, public amenities, and urban design improve usability for elderly residents in Little Tokyo?

SITE CONTEXT

Toriumi Plaza, located at 1st and San Pedro Street in Little Tokyo, Los Angeles is an approximately 1 acre, underutilized site within a dense, transit-accessible neighborhood with a high concentration of older adults.

- Previously occupied by a large unhoused encampment, cleared and now remains fenced and inactive
- Surrounded by senior housing, community services, and pedestrian activity
- Limited access to usable open space in the immediate area

METHODOLOGY

This study used an in-person survey of older adults to understand how public space design affects usability in Little Tokyo's Toriumi Plaza.

SURVEY APPROACH

- 50 adults (65+) surveyed
- Conducted around Toriumi Plaza and nearby community areas
- Paper surveys used to ensure accessibility
- Translated into Japanese and Spanish

SURVEY CONTENT

Participants ranked the importance on the following design features:

Accessibility
(Onose et al., 2020; Dong et al., 2025; Guo et al., 2024; Zhai et al., 2020; mobility (City of Los Angeles Department of Recreation and Parks, 2025)

Comfort
(Ibes et al., 2018; Lak et al., 2019; Zhang et al., 2025; City of Los Angeles Department of Recreation and Parks, 2025)

Safety
(Figueiro et al., 2011; Kimic and Polko, 2022; Onose et al., 2020; City of Los Angeles Department of Recreation and Parks, 2025)

Social Interaction
(Cui et al., 2024; Villani et al., 2022; Chen et al., 2022;City of Los Angeles Department of Recreation and Parks, 2025)

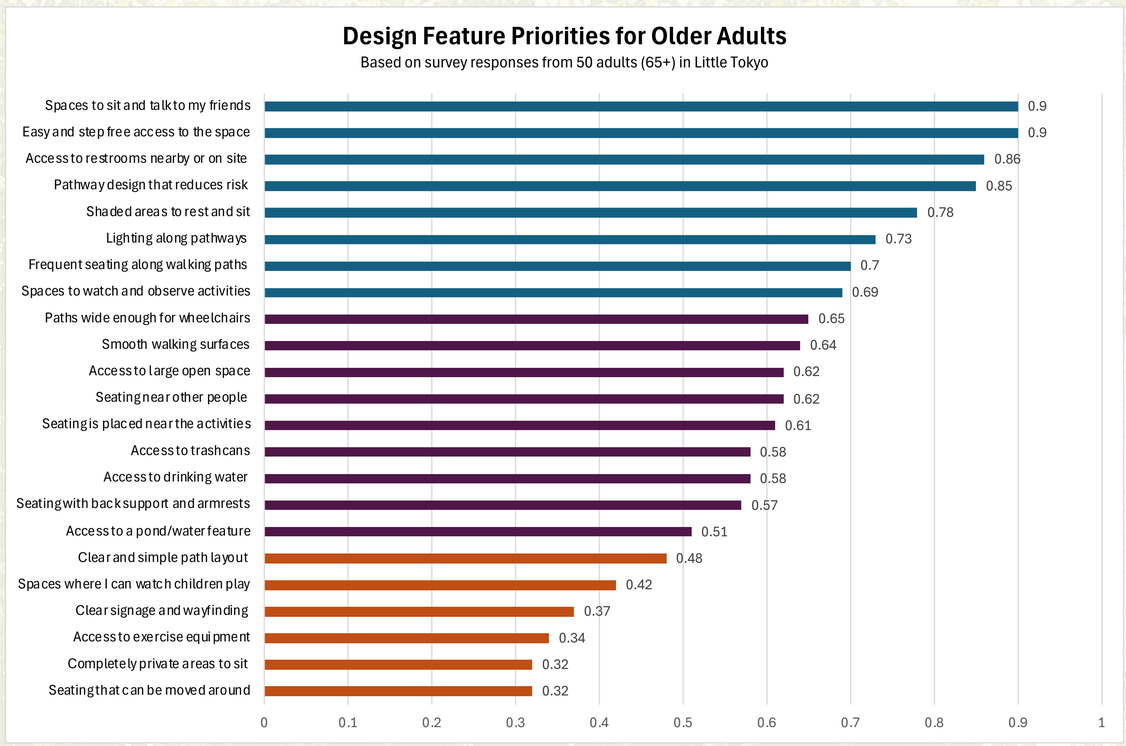
Additional Amenities

DATA ANALYSIS

- Ranking responses were converted into numerical scores
- Scores were normalized to a 0-1 scale for comparison
- Results were grouped into priority levels

High Priority (0.70-1.00)
Moderate Priority (0.50-0.69)
Lower Priority (<0.50)

KEY FINDINGS



SCAN HERE FOR FULL SURVEY INSTRUMENT

SCAN HERE FOR FULL SURVEY RESULTS

SURVEY FINDINGS

Survey results evalute user priorities across the four predefined themes: **Accessibility, Comfort, Safety, and Social Interaction** with the addition of **Additional Amenities.** The findings identified which specific features within each category are most important to older adults and have the greatest impact on usability.

High Priority* | *Moderate Priority* | *Lower Priority

ACCESSIBILITY

Easy and step free access to the space (0.9)
Smooth walking surfaces (0.64)
Paths wide enough for walkers/wheelchairs (0.65)
Physical access and fall prevention are prioritized over navigation features

COMFORT

Frequent seating along walking paths (0.7)
Shaded areas to rest and sit (0.78)
Seating with back support and armrests (0.57)
Seating is placed near the activities (0.61)
Shade and availability of seating are more important than flexible seating design

SAFETY

Pathway design that reduces risk (0.85)
Lighting along pathways (0.73)
Seating near other people (0.62)
Visibility and safe circulation are prioritized over privacy

SOCIAL INTERACTION

Spaces to sit and talk to my friends (0.9)
Spaces to watch and observe activities (0.69)
Direct social interaction is preferred over passive or observational activities

ADDITIONAL AMENITIES

Access to restrooms nearby or on site (0.86)
Access to drinking water (0.58)
Access to large open space (0.62)
Access to trashcans (0.58)
Basic functional amenities are prioritized over recreational features

RECOMMENDATIONS

PRIMARY POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

These design recommendations are based directly on high-moderate priority user needs identified through survey data and aim to improve usability, safety, and social interaction for older adults in Little Tokyo.

ACCESSIBILITY
High Priority: Provide step-free access throughout the site (0.90) with no abrupt elevation changes
Moderate Priority: Design wide (ADA-compliant), non-slip pathways (0.65-0.64) to support walkers and wheelchairs

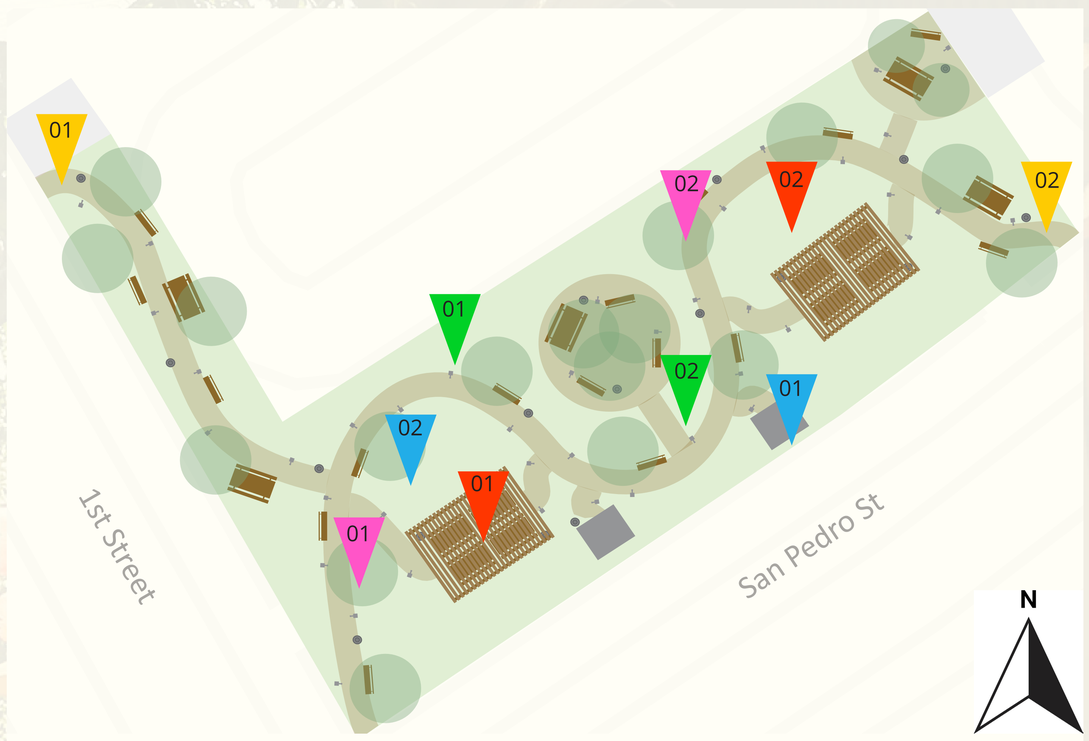
COMFORT
High Priority: Install shaded seating around the space and at regular intervals along walking paths (0.7-0.78)
Moderate Priority: Provide benches with backrests and armrests near activity zones (0.57-0.61)

SAFETY
High Priority: Design even, low-risk walking surfaces (0.85) to reduce risk of fall hazards
Provide pedestrian-scaled lighting (0.73) along all primary circulation routes
Moderate Priority: Place seating near other open space users (0.62)

SOCIAL INTERACTION
High Priority: Create seating clusters (0.90) to support conversation and ground activities
Moderate Priority: Provide spaces to observe surrounding activities (0.69)

ADDITIONAL AMENITIES
High Priority: Include accessible restrooms on site (0.86) near main activity areas
Moderate Priority: Provide drinking water, trash infrastructure, and accessible open space for activities (0.58-0.62)

DESIGN OPPORTUNITIES



CONCLUSION

This study examined how older adults prioritize design features in public space using survey data collected in Little Tokyo.

The findings indicate that **accessible circulation, shaded seating, safety, and opportunities for social interaction are consistently prioritized.** These preferences suggest that physical design features play an important role in shaping how older adults experience and use public space. Absence of these features may limit usability and comfort for aging populations. By applying these findings to the design of Toriumi Plaza, it demonstrates how user-identified priorities can be translated into spatial strategies. Design elements such as step-free pathways, shaded seating, and social gathering areas reflect the features most frequently identified by respondents.

As cities continue to age, designing public spaces around the needs of older adults will be essential for creating places that are usable, comfortable, and inclusive.

RESEARCH PAPER