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Age-Gender Inclusiveness in City Centres – A comparative study of Tehran and Belfast

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

A city centre or town centre has been recognised as the beating heart and public legacy of an urban fabric either in a small town, medium-sized city, metropolis or megalopolis. Within this spectrum of scales, city centres' scopes significantly vary in the global context while considering the physical as well as the intangible and the spiritual features. Concerns such as the overall dimensions, skyline, density and compactness, variety of functions and their distribution, comfort, safety, accessibility, resilience, inclusiveness, vibrancy and conviviality, and the dialectics of modernity and traditionalism are only some examples that elucidate the existing complexities of city centres in a city of any scale (overall dimension) (for further details see for instance Behzadfar, 2007; Gehl, 20210; Gehl and Svarre, 2013; Hambleton, 2015; Lacey et al., 2013; Madanipour, 2010; Roberts, 2013).

Regardless of the issue of the context, Gehl (2010) defines city centres as interconnected with new concepts such as "better city space, more city life", and "lively and attractive hub for the inhabitants" (pp. 13–15). Roberts (2006) explains the notion of a city centre or town centre as a space "in which human interaction and therefore creativity could flourish". According to her, the point can be realised by creating or revitalising 24-hour city policies that can omit the "'lagerlout' phenomenon, whereby drunken youths dominated largely empty town centres after dark" (pp. 333–334). De Certeau (1984) explains that a city and, subsequently, a city centre is where "the ordinary man, a common hero [is] a ubiquitous character, walking in countless thousands on the streets" (p. V). Paumier (2004) depicts a city centre, particularly a successful and vibrant one, as "the focus of the business, culture, entertainment … to seek and discover… to see and be seen, to meet, learn and enjoy [which] facilitates a wonderful human chemistry … for entertainment and tourism and [has] the potential to stimulate local and regional economies" (p.3).

These few examples represent a wide range of physical, mental and spiritual concerns that need to be applied in city centres' current and future design and planning of city centres. The term 'concern' here refers to opportunities, potentials, problems, and challenges. On the one hand, we —the academics and professionals in the fields associated with urbanism— are dealing with theoretical works and planning documents such as short-to-long term masterplans, development plans and agendas. On the other hand, we face complicated tangible issues such as financial matters of economic growth or crisis, tourism, and adding or removing business districts/sections. Beyond all 'on-paper' or 'on-desk' schemes and economic status, a city centre is experienced and explored by many citizens and tourists daily. This research aims to understand the city centre from the eyes of an ordinary user —or, as explained by De Certeau (1984), from the visions of a "common hero".

In a comparative study and considering the scale indicator, the size of one city centre might even exceed the total size of another city. However, within all these varieties and differences, some principal functions perform as the in-common formative core of city centres worldwide. This investigation has selected eight similar categories of these functions to simultaneously investigate two different case study cities of Tehran and Belfast. This mainly includes: 1) an identity-based historical element; 2) shopping; 3) religious buildings; 4) a residential area; 5) a network of squares and streets; 6) connection with natural structures; 7) administrative and official Buildings; and 8) recreational and non-reactional retail units. This would thus elaborate on if/how the dissimilarities of contexts manifest themselves in similarities and differences of in-common functions in the current city centres.

Focusing on the age-gender indicator, this investigation studies the sociocultural aspect of inclusiveness and how it could be reflected in future design and planning programmes of the case study cities. In short, the aim is to explore the design and planning guidelines and strategies —both identical and divergent— for Tehran and Belfast to move towards sociocultural inclusiveness and sustainability. In this research, as a result of the COVID-19 Pandemic, the studies of the current situation of inclusiveness in Belfast city centre have remained incomplete. Thus, this presentation would like to perform either as an opening of a platform for potential investigations about Belfast case study city or as an invitation for future collaborations with the researcher for comparative studies about age-gender inclusiveness in city centres worldwide.

In short, this research tries to investigate the current situation by identifying unrecognised opportunities and how they can be applied in future short-to-long plans, as well as by appreciating the neglected problems and proposing design-planning solutions to achieve age-gender inclusiveness. The applied methodology mainly includes the direct appraisal within a 1-year timespan of September 2019 – September 2020 to cover all seasonal and festive effects. Later, however, to consider the role of the COVID-19 Pandemic, the direct appraisal was extended until January 2021. The complementary method to the direct appraisal is photography to freeze fast the moments of the ordinary scenes of the life of the case study city centres (John Paul and Caponigro Arts, 2014; Langmann and Pick, 2018). The simultaneous study of the captured images would thus contribute to a better analysis of the age-gender inclusiveness in the non-interfered status of Tehran and Belfast.

Keywords: Age-gender, Inclusiveness, Sociocultural, City Centre, Urban Heritage, Tehran, Belfast

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