The Effect of Built Environment on Neighborhood Relations in the Context of Social Interaction*

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Abstract

Social psychology is the scientific study of how people's thoughts, feelings, and behaviors are influenced by the actual, imagined, or implied presence of others. As a sub-branch of social psychology, environmental psychology is primarily interested in the interaction between humans and the built and natural environment. Its aim is to gain a better understanding of the relationship between human behavior and the physical environment. Nowadays, cities have a significant impact on human behavior as places where most people live. Considerable changes have been experienced in people's living spaces in recent decades. High-rise housing and gated-communities commonly take part in cities. The aim of this study is to understand how the environment influences neighborhood relations. In the field study, 11 selected sample areas in Konya (Turkey) are analyzed. Each sampling area has a different urban pattern. Individual, structured interviews including open-ended questions were conducted among a random sample of 114 respondents.

The study shows urban pattern has significant effects on neighborhood relations, solidarity and social ties. Social relations are strong in areas with detached houses. However, in areas with high-rise buildings social relations are weaker, furthermore most of the neighbors do not know or interact with each other. In gated communities selected for this study, mostly high blocks are separated with wide openings between them. Although these semi-public spaces seem to be opportunities for social relations, they are not used as much as anticipated. Besides these factors, walkability affects social relations. People are more likely to meet neighbors when walking whereas underground parking solutions decrease people's interaction with their environment.

Key words: Built environment, Neighborhood relations, Konya.

Built Environment and Neighborhood Relations

Social psychology is the scientific study of how people's thoughts, feelings, and behaviors are influenced by the actual, imagined, or implied presence of others (Allport 1998). As a sub-branch of social psychology, environmental psychology is primarily interested in the interaction between humans and the built and natural environment. Environmental psychology studies human-environment interactions at different scales, from domestic surroundings and the neighbourhood to cities, and even the planet as a whole (Steg and Groot, 2019). Its aim is to gain a better understanding of the relationship between human behavior and the physical environment (Bechtel and Churchman, 2002).

Nowadays, cities have a significant impact on human behavior as places where most people live. Considerable changes have been experienced in people's living spaces in recent

decades. The aim of this study is to understand the impact of the built environment on neighborhood relations. In the field study, 11 selected sample areas in Konya (Turkey) are analyzed. Each sampling area has a different urban pattern. Structured interviews including open-ended questions were conducted among a random sample of 114 respondents.
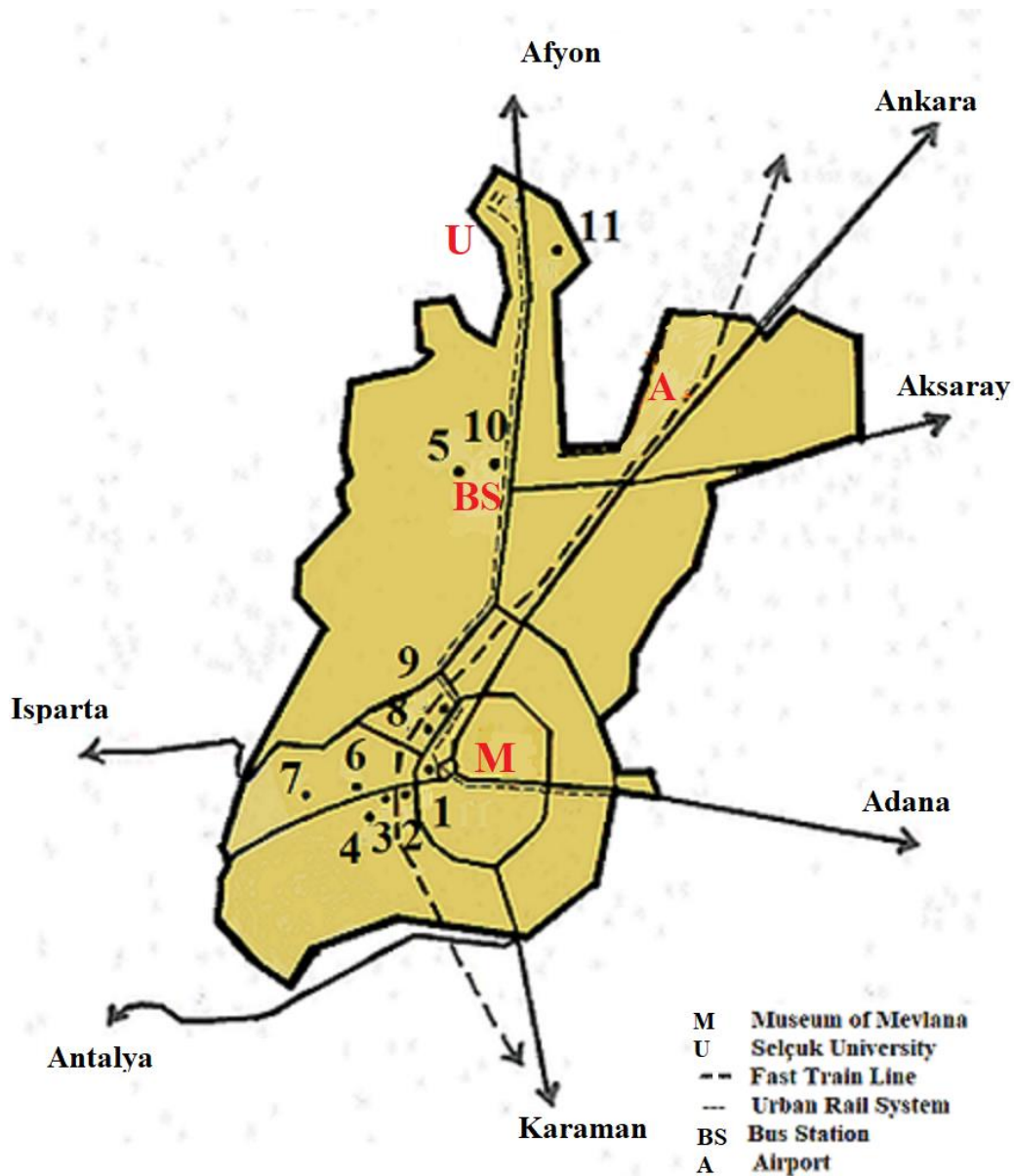

Figure 1:Sampling areas in Konya

Living in city center

The 1st sample area is in city center. The twentieth century witnessed urban centers' losing many of their traditional functions and becoming shopping and commercial centers. One of the most notable changes has been the decentralization of the resident population. Recent

research suggests that during the 1990s, city-center living began to attract many people to seek an integrated mixed-use (Heath, 2001). Living in city center also have some advantages and disadvantages. Vitality and diversity is high in this field. Many services and transportation options are likely to be near and trade rate is high. But high trade rate influence neighborly relations adversely. During interviews, respondents stated that they always meet with strangers in the street and outside their flats. 25% of the respondents stated that they never see other neighbours. There are almost no semi-public spaces where people can communicate. Therefore, neighborly relations and helpfulness are weak compared to other areas. 36% of the respondents visited their neighbors at home and sometimes bring food to each other. And 27% of them can borrow money from the neighbor and leave the key. Consequently 55% were satisfied whereas 45% were dissatisfied with neighbor relations.

Figure 2: 1st sample area (Hale Öncel's personal archive , 2015)

Walkability

The 2nd and 3rd areas have similar urban pattern. Both areas consist of 3-4 storey apartments. The second area is one of the oldest district near the city center and consist of contiguous buildings. Density and diversity is high in this field. This area is closer to the city center so walkability is high. Walkability affects social relations, people are more likely to meet neighbors when walking. Neighborhood relations are strong in the area. 81% of the respondents visited their neighbors at home and their neighbors visited them back. 72% of the respondents sometimes bring food to each other. And 18% of them can borrow money from the neighbor and leave the key because of mutual trust. We asked how satisfied the people interviewed were with the kind of neighbor relations they had: 63% were satisfied whereas 18% partially satisfied

and 18% were dissatisfied. Besides, different social classes live in this area and all respondents interviewed are satisfied with the neighborhood.

Figure 3: 2nd sample area (Hale Öncel's personal archive, 2014)

The only difference of the 3rd area from 2nd area is that it is 1 km further away from the city center and it has a railway that restricts pedestrian access. Consequently, walkability decreases significantly and affects social relations. Neighborly relations and helpfulness are weak compared to second area. 63% of the respondents visited their neighbors at home and their neighbors visited them back. 54% of the respondents sometimes bring food to each other. We asked how satisfied the people interviewed were with the kind of neighbor relations they had: 63% were satisfied whereas 18% were partially satisfied and 18% were dissatisfied.

Figure 4: 3rd sample area (Hale Öncel's personal archive, 2015)

Gated communities

4th and 5th sample areas consist of gated-communities. They are seperated with sharp border from neighborhood. Therefore creates a closed living space in big city blocks. These areas cause social segregation. The ratio of educated, middle-aged, family with children is high in the field. Studies show that, respondents who regarded their neighbors as being similar to themselves in age, economic circumstances, education, and children's ages tended to visit their

neighbor more than those who regarded their neighbors as dissimilar (Ginsberg, 1985). However, the homogeneity of the population has no positive effect on neighborly relations. In gated communities selected for this study, mostly high blocks are seperated with wide openings between them. Although these semi-public spaces seem to be opportunities for social interaction, they are not used as much as anticipated. In addition, underground parking solutions decrease people's interaction with their environment. And reduces the likelihood of people meeting each other. Thus the relationship between house and public space is weak. Only 27% of the total sample did know their neighbors. 36% of the respondents sometimes brings food to each other those who meet with neighbors in semi-public spaces. Therefore, neighborly relations are weak compared to other areas. 40% were satisfied whereas 15% were dissatisfied with the kind of neighbor relations. Respondents stated that they don't know the neighborhood outside their gated-community.

Figure 5: 5th and 4th sample area (Hale Öncel's personal archive, 2015)

Semi-detached houses

6th and 7th sample areas include semi-detached houses in low buildings zone. In these areas, the relationship between houses and the public space is strong. So neighbors can meet in the street or in the garden. Neighborhood relations are strong in these areas. In sixth area 30% of the respondents visited their neighbors everyday, also 70% of the respondents visited their neighbors at home. 80% of the respondents sometimes bring food to each other. We asked how satisfied the people interviewed were with the kind of neighbor relations they had: 70% were satisfied whereas 10% were partially satisfied and 20% were dissatisfied. In the area trade uses are increasing in recent years. Respondents stated that this situation disrupted the social structure. Even so social relations are strong in areas including semi-detached houses with little parcels.

In 7th area neighborhood relations are strong as well. Similarly, 50% of the respondents visited their neighbors everyday, also 80% of the respondents visited their neighbors at home. 70% of the respondents sometimes bring food to each other. We asked how satisfied the people interviewed were with the kind of neighbor relations they had: 70% were satisfied whereas 30% were partially satisfied.

Figure 6: 7th and 6th sample area (Hale Öncel's personal archive, 2015)

High density and high rise buildings

It's believed that high-rise apartment dwelling has adverse effects on mental and social health (Cappon, 1972). The total number of people who reside in One Big Residence means that, in a sense, strangers share your dwelling, at least the semi-public areas of it. Sharing your dwelling with such a high number of strangers may fear of strangers and thus fear of crime for the residents. This may lead to a felt lack of social support and the absence of community in the midst of many. Research is unanimous in finding that rates of helping others are lower in high-rise buildings and residents of high rises have fewer friendships in the building than residents of low rises. Social interaction is more difficult for residents to regulate. This can lead to withdrawal, which can lead to loss of community and social support. The structure of high rises usually is such that one is not likely to meet residents of other floors except in elevators and lobbies, which are barely more personal than the street. Thus, one lives physically close to many others, but in practice is limited to those on one's floor for the sort of encounters that might lead to friendship, such as borrowing food or talking while children play (Gifford, 2007). Sample areas 8th, 9th and 10th include high rise buildings. In 8th and 9th areas, central urban location is an advantage but population density is particularly high. The 10th area is 10 km far away from city center. These areas with high-rise buildings social relations are weaker, furthermore most of the neighbors do not know or interact with each other. 8th area has 12-storey apartment-blocks. Respodents stated that the area is insecure at nights and there is no space to meet with

neighbors outside flats. Only 36% of them visited their neighbors at home and sometimes brings food to each other. And 63% were satisfied whereas 36% were partially satisfied with neighborhood relations.

In 9th area has 7-16 storey aparment-blocks. During interviews, 45% of the respondents stated that they never met with their neighbors. 54% percent of them visited their neighbors at home. We asked how satisfied the people interviewed were with the kind of neighbor relations they had: 54% were satisfied whereas 18% were partially satisfied and 27% were dissatisfied.

In 10th area has 5-8 storey apartment-blocks. During interviews, 37% of the respondents stated that they never met with their neighbors and did not know each other. Only 12% of them visited their neighbors at home. 25% of the respondents sometimes brings food to each other. And 62% were satisfied whereas 25% were partially satisfied and 12% were dissatisfied with neighborhood relations.

Figure 7: 8th , 9th and 10th sample area (Hale Öncel's personal archive, 2015)

Leapfrog development

The last field research was made in a neighborhood near Selçuk University campus. This area is an example of leapfrog development and socially consist of students and lower income groups. The area has the lowest population density. Most of the respondents come from

rural areas and keep on rural living habits. They use street or gardens for some activity like baking bread and socialize. Neighborly interactions and helpfulness are strong. In the area 70% of the respondents visited their neighbors everyday, also 90% of the respondents visited their neighbors at home. 80% of the respondents sometimes bring food to each other. We asked how satisfied the people interviewed were with the kind of neighbor relations they had: 80% were satisfied whereas 20% were partially satisfied.

Figure 8: 11th sample area (Hale Öncel's personal archive, 2015)

Conclusion

The study shows urban pattern has significant effects on neighborhood relations, helpfulness and social ties. Social relations are strong in areas with semi-detached houses and low building zones. If there is a strong relations and continuity between the public, semi-public and private spaces, neighborly relations are positively affected. Neighbors can meet in the street or in the garden. However, in areas with high-rise buildings social relations are weaker, furthermore most of the neighbors do not know or interact with each other. Research has shown that rates of helping others are lower in high-rise buildings and residents of high rises have fewer friendships in the building than residents of low rises. On the other hand, gated communities, which are mostly located in cities in recent years, have negative social effects. Firstly, it causes social segregation. Residents don't know the neighborhood outside their gated-community. In gated communities selected for this study, mostly high blocks are separated with wide openings between them. Although these semi-public spaces seem to be opportunities for social relations, they are not used as much as anticipated. Besides these factors, walkability affects social relations. People are more likely to meet neighbors when walking whereas underground parking solutions decrease people's interaction with their environment. Therefore,

neighboring relations and helpfulness are weak in gated communities. Neighborhood relationships were found to be strong when similar social groups lived together.

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