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Age-Friendly Urbanism in Malaysia: Rethinking Policy for Active Ageing

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A b s t r a c t

Malaysia's rapid demographic transition towards an ageing society highlights the urgent need to embed age-friendly principles into urban policy. While existing strategies emphasise healthcare and welfare, less attention has been given to urban design and the built environment that enable independence, mobility, and social participation for older adults. This paper rethinks Malaysian urban policies through the lens of age-friendly urbanism, drawing upon secondary data from WHO frameworks, national policies, and selected international case studies. The analysis reveals gaps in accessibility, housing, and transport planning, while identifying opportunities through smart city initiatives and community-based urban design. A conceptual model is proposed that integrates inclusive physical environments, social participation, and policy alignment to support active ageing. The study contributes by positioning age-friendly urbanism as a critical pathway for Malaysia to build resilient, inclusive, and sustainable cities in the face of demographic change.

K e y w o r d s : Age-friendly urbanism; Active ageing; Urban policy; Inclusive cities; Malaysia.

1. Introduction

Malaysia is undergoing a rapid demographic transition towards an ageing society, reflecting broader global trends characterised by declining fertility rates and increasing life expectancy. Recent statistics indicate that individuals aged 60 years and above are projected to constitute more than 15% of the total population by 2030, marking Malaysia's transition into an ageing nation (Abdullah et al., 2024; Institute for Public Health, 2025). This shift is not merely demographic but structural, with profound implications for economic productivity, healthcare systems, and social support mechanisms. As the ageing population continues to expand—reaching an estimated 5.8 million by 2030—the need to re-evaluate existing policy frameworks becomes increasingly urgent (Department of Statistics Malaysia, as cited in Sinar Daily, 2026). Consequently, ageing is no longer a future concern but an immediate policy priority requiring integrated and forward-looking strategies.

The concept of active ageing, as promoted by the World Health Organization, provides a comprehensive framework for addressing the needs of older populations by emphasising health, participation, and security as core pillars of well-being. This approach moves beyond a narrow focus on healthcare provision, advocating instead for environments that enable older adults to remain independent, socially engaged, and physically active. However, in many developing contexts, including Malaysia, policy responses remain predominantly centred on healthcare services and welfare assistance, with limited attention given to the spatial and environmental dimensions that shape everyday experiences of ageing. This imbalance suggests a critical gap between the theoretical aspirations of active ageing and the practical realities of urban living, where infrastructure, mobility, and accessibility significantly influence quality of life.

Despite increasing recognition of population ageing, there remains a lack of integration between urban policy and ageing-related frameworks in Malaysia. Existing studies and policy initiatives tend to address ageing from a social or healthcare perspective, often overlooking the role of urban design in facilitating independence and social participation among older adults. This gap highlights the need to reconceptualise urban development through the lens of age-friendly urbanism, which integrates inclusive physical environments, accessible transport systems, and community-oriented spaces. Therefore, this study aims to evaluate Malaysian urban policies through an age-friendly perspective, identify key gaps and opportunities, and propose a conceptual model that aligns urban planning with the principles of active ageing. By doing so, the paper contributes to ongoing debates on sustainable and inclusive urban development in ageing societies.

2. Literature Review

The concept of active ageing, as articulated by the World Health Organization, represents a paradigm shift from viewing ageing as a period of decline to recognising it as a stage of continued participation, productivity, and well-being. Defined as the process of optimising opportunities for health, participation, and security to enhance quality of life as people age, the framework emphasises a life-course and multidimensional approach (World Health Organization, 2002; World Health Organization, 2020). Contemporary scholarship further expands this understanding by highlighting the role of functional ability, which emerges from the interaction between individual capacities and environmental conditions (Rudnicka et al., 2020). This suggests that ageing outcomes are not solely biologically determined but are significantly shaped by broader social and spatial contexts. In this regard, the built environment becomes a critical determinant of whether older adults can remain independent, socially connected, and actively engaged in society.

Building on this premise, the concept of age-friendly urbanism extends the principles of active ageing into the spatial domain, focusing on how cities can be designed to accommodate the needs of ageing populations. According to the World Health Organization age-friendly cities framework, an age-friendly environment is one that enables older adults to live safely, maintain health, and participate fully in society through supportive physical and social infrastructures (World Health Organization, 2007). Key elements of such environments include accessibility, mobility, housing, and public spaces, all of which directly influence the ability of older adults to age in place. Recent studies emphasise that these elements must be addressed through integrated, place-based approaches that account for the complex interaction between urban design and social inclusion (Amen et al., 2023;Woolrych et al., 2022; van Hoof, 2021). However, while the theoretical foundations of age-friendly urbanism are well established, their translation into policy and practice remains uneven, particularly in developing contexts.

In Malaysia, policy frameworks such as the National Policy for Older Persons (Dasar Warga Emas Negara, DWEN) and the National Urbanisation Policy demonstrate an increasing awareness of population ageing and its implications. These policies aim to promote the well-being, independence, and social participation of older persons through multi-sectoral strategies involving healthcare, social support, and community engagement (Government of Malaysia, 2011; Abdullah et al., 2024). Nevertheless, existing literature consistently highlights a critical limitation: the lack of integration between ageing-related policies and urban planning mechanisms. Policy implementation remains largely fragmented across sectors and governance levels, resulting in limited coordination between social policy objectives and spatial planning practices (Tan et al., 2022; ISIS Malaysia, 2024). Consequently, urban environments in Malaysia often fall short in addressing key aspects of accessibility, mobility, and inclusive housing, indicating a disconnect between policy intent and lived realities. This suggests that current approaches remain predominantly sectoral rather than holistic, underscoring the need for a more spatially integrated policy framework.

Insights from international contexts further reinforce the importance of integrated and coordinated approaches to age-friendly urbanism. Countries such as Japan have demonstrated how advanced ageing societies can align urban planning, healthcare systems, and community-based services to support ageing in place through initiatives such as barrier-free infrastructure and compact city development (Cabinet Office of Japan, 2023; Aziz & Ali, 2025; Muramatsu & Akiyama, 2021). Similarly, Singapore's emphasis on smart and inclusive urban development highlights the potential of integrating digital technologies with age-friendly design to enhance accessibility, mobility, and social participation (Ministry of National Development Singapore, 2023; Yuen & Soh, 2020). In Europe, the development of walkable cities and participatory urban governance models further illustrates how inclusive design and community engagement can foster both social inclusion and urban resilience (Buffel et al., 2022; Eurostat, 2022). Collectively, these international experiences demonstrate that successful age-friendly urbanism requires more than policy recognition; it necessitates the alignment of spatial planning, governance structures, and community participation. For Malaysia, these comparative insights highlight the need to move beyond fragmented and sectoral approaches towards a more integrated and place-based model that embeds age-friendly principles within the core of urban policy and planning.

Despite the growing emphasis on active ageing and age-friendly urbanism within policy discourse, a persistent theoretical tension remains between policy intent and spatial reality. While national frameworks—guided by principles promoted by the World Health Organization—advocate for environments that support health, participation, and security, their translation into the built environment is often uneven and insufficiently operationalised. This disconnect reflects a broader issue within urban governance, where ageing is frequently framed as a social or healthcare concern rather than a spatial and infrastructural challenge embedded within urban systems (World Health Organization, 2020; Buffel et al., 2022). As a result, policy commitments tend to remain normative and aspirational, lacking the concrete spatial integration required to reshape everyday urban experiences of older adults. The concept of "ageing in place," for instance, is widely endorsed, yet its realisation is constrained by urban forms that are not designed to accommodate declining mobility, accessibility needs, or social connectivity.

This tension can also be understood through the fragmentation between sectoral policy domains and spatial planning practices, where governance structures operate in silos rather than through integrated, place-based approaches. Urban planning systems often prioritise economic growth, infrastructure expansion, and efficiency, while ageing policies focus on welfare provision and service delivery, resulting in limited convergence between the two (van Hoof, 2021; Tan et al., 2022). Consequently, the lived experiences of older adults reveal gaps that are not captured at the policy level, including barriers in walkability, inaccessible public transport, and socially isolating urban environments. These shortcomings

highlight the limitations of policy frameworks that do not adequately engage with spatial realities, reinforcing the need for a reconceptualisation of urban governance that embeds age-friendly principles within the core of planning systems. Addressing this theoretical tension requires moving beyond rhetorical alignment towards actionable integration, where policy, design, and community practices are systematically aligned to produce inclusive and resilient urban environments for ageing populations.

3. Methodology

This study employs a qualitative research design based on document analysis to examine how urban policy in Malaysia aligns with the principles of active ageing and age friendly urbanism. A qualitative approach is particularly suitable as the study seeks to interpret policy intentions, identify conceptual gaps, and develop a theoretically informed understanding rather than to test causal relationships. Document analysis enables the systematic examination of policy texts, institutional reports, and international frameworks to uncover underlying assumptions, priorities, and areas of omission within policy discourse (Bowen, 2009; Flick, 2018). In this study, documents are not treated as neutral sources of information but as constructed representations of policy thinking that shape how ageing and urban development are framed and implemented (Prior, 2003). This interpretive orientation allows the research to critically assess the extent to which age friendly principles are embedded within existing urban governance structures in Malaysia.

The data sources consist of three main categories that provide both conceptual and contextual depth. First, global normative frameworks developed by the World Health Organization are used to establish the theoretical foundation of active ageing and age friendly environments, including key documents such as Active Ageing A Policy Framework and the Decade of Healthy Ageing reports (World Health Organization, 2002; World Health Organization, 2020). Second, national level policy documents are analysed to assess Malaysia's institutional response to population ageing, particularly the National Policy for Older Persons and major urban planning frameworks such as the National Urbanisation Policy (Government of Malaysia, 2011; PLANMalaysia, 2016). Third, selected international case studies from countries with advanced ageing and urban systems, including Japan, Singapore, and European contexts, are incorporated to provide comparative insights into how age friendly urbanism is operationalised in practice (Muramatsu and Akiyama, 2021; Buffel et al., 2022). The combination of these sources enables analytical triangulation and strengthens the robustness of the study.

The analysis is conducted using thematic analysis in combination with policy analysis to ensure both depth and critical interpretation. Thematic analysis is used to identify recurring patterns and key themes across the dataset, particularly those related to accessibility, mobility, housing, social participation, and policy integration (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Through an iterative process of coding and categorisation, the analysis reveals both explicit policy priorities and implicit gaps in the treatment of ageing within urban systems. This is complemented by policy analysis, which examines the coherence, scope, and implementation logic of existing frameworks, with particular attention to the level of integration between social policy objectives and spatial planning practices (Howlett and Cashore, 2009). By combining these approaches, the study not only maps the presence of age friendly principles within policy documents but also critically evaluates their translation into spatial realities. This integrated analytical strategy enables the identification of structural misalignments between policy aspirations and the lived experiences of older adults, thereby informing the development of a more coherent and spatially grounded framework for age friendly urbanism in Malaysia.

4. Findings and Discussion

The analysis reveals a persistent misalignment between policy aspirations and the lived spatial realities experienced by older adults in Malaysian urban environments. While national policies acknowledge the importance of active ageing, their translation into inclusive and supportive urban spaces remains limited. This section critically examines three key dimensions, namely gaps in the built environment, structural policy challenges, and emerging opportunities for transformation.

4.1 Gaps in the Urban Environment

Findings indicate that the current urban environment in Malaysia continues to present significant barriers to accessibility, mobility, and independent living among older adults. Accessibility remains a major concern, particularly in relation to pedestrian infrastructure such as uneven walkways, lack of continuous sidewalks, and inadequate crossing facilities. These physical barriers limit the ability of older persons to navigate urban spaces safely and independently, thereby restricting their participation in daily activities. Empirical studies have shown that poor walkability and inaccessible built environments are associated with reduced physical activity and increased social isolation among older populations (Tan et al., 2022; World Health Organization, 2020). In this regard, accessibility is not merely a design issue but a determinant of health and social inclusion.

Mobility challenges are further compounded by public transportation systems that are not sufficiently adapted to the needs of ageing users. Limited availability of barrier free transport, inadequate seating, and insufficient last mile connectivity reduce the usability of public transport for older adults. This restricts access to essential services, social networks, and community engagement opportunities, ultimately undermining the principles of active ageing (World Health Organization, 2023). Housing also emerges as a critical gap, as existing residential developments often lack age friendly features such as universal design, proximity to services, and community integration. Research suggests that housing inadequacies significantly affect the ability of older adults to age in place, leading to increased dependency and reduced quality of life (Yuen and Soh, 2020). Collectively, these findings highlight that the built environment in Malaysia remains

insufficiently aligned with the needs of an ageing population, reflecting a broader disconnect between urban development and demographic realities.

4.2 Policy Challenges

Beyond physical infrastructure, the findings point to deeper structural challenges within the policy landscape that hinder the development of age friendly urban environments. One of the most significant issues is the lack of coordination across policy domains and governance levels. Ageing related policies are often managed by social welfare and health agencies, while urban planning falls under separate institutional frameworks, resulting in fragmented implementation and limited policy coherence (Abdullah et al., 2024). This institutional separation restricts the integration of age friendly principles into core planning processes, leading to policies that operate in silos rather than through a coordinated and holistic approach.

In addition, existing policies tend to lack spatial sensitivity, meaning that they do not sufficiently account for how physical environments shape the everyday experiences of older adults. While policy documents frequently emphasise well being and social participation, they often fail to translate these goals into spatial planning guidelines or design standards that can be operationalised at the local level. This reflects a broader tendency to conceptualise ageing as a social issue rather than a spatial one embedded within urban systems (van Hoof, 2021). Furthermore, policy responses in Malaysia remain largely reactive, focusing on addressing the consequences of ageing such as healthcare needs and social assistance rather than proactively designing environments that prevent exclusion and dependency. Such an approach limits the transformative potential of policy interventions and reinforces the gap between policy intent and spatial outcomes.

4.3 Opportunities and Potential for Transformation

Despite these challenges, the findings also reveal significant opportunities for advancing age friendly urbanism in Malaysia through emerging policy and technological developments. One key area of potential lies in the expansion of smart city initiatives, which offer new possibilities for integrating digital technologies into urban systems to enhance accessibility, mobility, and service delivery. Smart mobility solutions, digital health platforms, and data driven urban management systems can support more responsive and inclusive environments for older adults when aligned with age friendly principles (Ministry of Housing and Local Government Malaysia, 2023). However, the effectiveness of such initiatives depends on their ability to address digital inclusion and ensure accessibility for ageing populations.

Another important opportunity is the growing emphasis on community based urban design, which prioritises local participation and bottom up approaches to planning. International evidence suggests that involving older adults in the design and management of urban spaces can enhance social inclusion, strengthen community resilience, and produce more context sensitive solutions (Buffel et al., 2022). This approach is particularly relevant in the Malaysian context, where community networks and informal support systems play a significant role in shaping the ageing experience. In addition, technological innovations such as assistive devices, age friendly housing design, and integrated service platforms offer new avenues for supporting independent living and improving quality of life among older adults (World Health Organization, 2023).

Overall, these findings suggest that while current urban environments and policy frameworks in Malaysia remain insufficiently aligned with the needs of an ageing population, there exists considerable potential for transformation. Realising this potential requires a shift from fragmented and reactive approaches towards integrated, forward looking strategies that embed age friendly principles within the core of urban planning and governance. This transition is essential for ensuring that Malaysian cities are not only sustainable but also inclusive and resilient in the face of demographic change.

5. Conceptual Framework

Building on the gaps identified in the preceding analysis, this study proposes an Age Friendly Urbanism Framework for Malaysia that integrates spatial design, social participation, and policy alignment within a broader community resilience perspective. The framework is grounded in the principles of active ageing advanced by the World Health Organization, which emphasise health, participation, and security as interconnected dimensions of well being (World Health Organization, 2002; World Health Organization, 2020). However, this study extends the existing framework by explicitly embedding these principles within the spatial and governance structures of urban systems. In doing so, it responds to the identified theoretical tension between policy aspirations and spatial realities by proposing a model that operationalises age friendly principles through integrated urban planning and community based approaches. The framework positions the built environment not as a passive backdrop but as an active enabler of independence, mobility, and social engagement among older adults.

The first component of the framework focuses on the development of an inclusive physical environment that supports accessibility and mobility across the life course. This includes age sensitive infrastructure such as barrier free pathways, safe pedestrian networks, accessible public transport, and housing designed according to universal design principles. Empirical evidence consistently demonstrates that accessible and walkable environments are strongly associated with improved physical health, reduced isolation, and enhanced quality of life among older adults (World Health Organization, 2007; Yen et al., 2021; Afara et al., 2024). By prioritising walkability and accessibility, the framework ensures that urban spaces enable rather than constrain daily activities and social participation. Importantly, this component recognises that

physical design must be responsive to varying functional abilities, thereby promoting ageing in place and reducing dependency on institutional care.

The second component emphasises social participation as a core dimension of age friendly urbanism. Beyond physical accessibility, urban environments must facilitate meaningful social interaction, community engagement, and active citizenship among older adults. This involves the provision of community spaces, recreational facilities, and opportunities for participation in cultural, economic, and civic activities. Research shows that social participation plays a critical role in maintaining mental health, life satisfaction, and a sense of belonging in later life (Buffel et al., 2022; Levasseur et al., 2020). Within the Malaysian context, where community networks and informal support systems remain significant, strengthening social participation also contributes to collective well being and social cohesion. The framework therefore integrates social infrastructure as a key element of urban planning, recognising that inclusive cities are not only physically accessible but also socially enabling.

The third component addresses policy alignment and governance integration, which are essential for translating age friendly principles into practice. As highlighted in the findings, one of the major limitations in the Malaysian context is the fragmentation between urban planning, social policy, and governance structures. This framework proposes a coordinated approach that aligns these domains through integrated planning processes, cross sectoral collaboration, and coherent policy implementation mechanisms. Effective governance is critical for ensuring that age friendly considerations are embedded within land use planning, transportation systems, housing policies, and service delivery (Howlett and Cashore, 2009; van Hoof, 2021). By bridging institutional silos, this component enhances the capacity of urban systems to respond proactively to demographic ageing rather than reacting to its consequences.

A key contribution of this framework lies in its integration of community resilience as an overarching dimension that connects all three components. Community resilience refers to the ability of communities to adapt, respond, and thrive in the face of social and demographic changes, including population ageing (Norris et al., 2008; Patel et al., 2017). In this context, resilience is not limited to coping mechanisms but encompasses the capacity to create supportive environments that sustain active ageing over time. By linking inclusive physical environments, social participation, and policy alignment within a resilience framework, the model provides a holistic approach that moves beyond sectoral interventions. This integration ensures that urban systems are not only age friendly but also adaptable and sustainable in the long term. Overall, the proposed framework offers a conceptual foundation for rethinking urban policy in Malaysia, positioning age friendly urbanism as a central pathway towards inclusive, resilient, and sustainable cities.

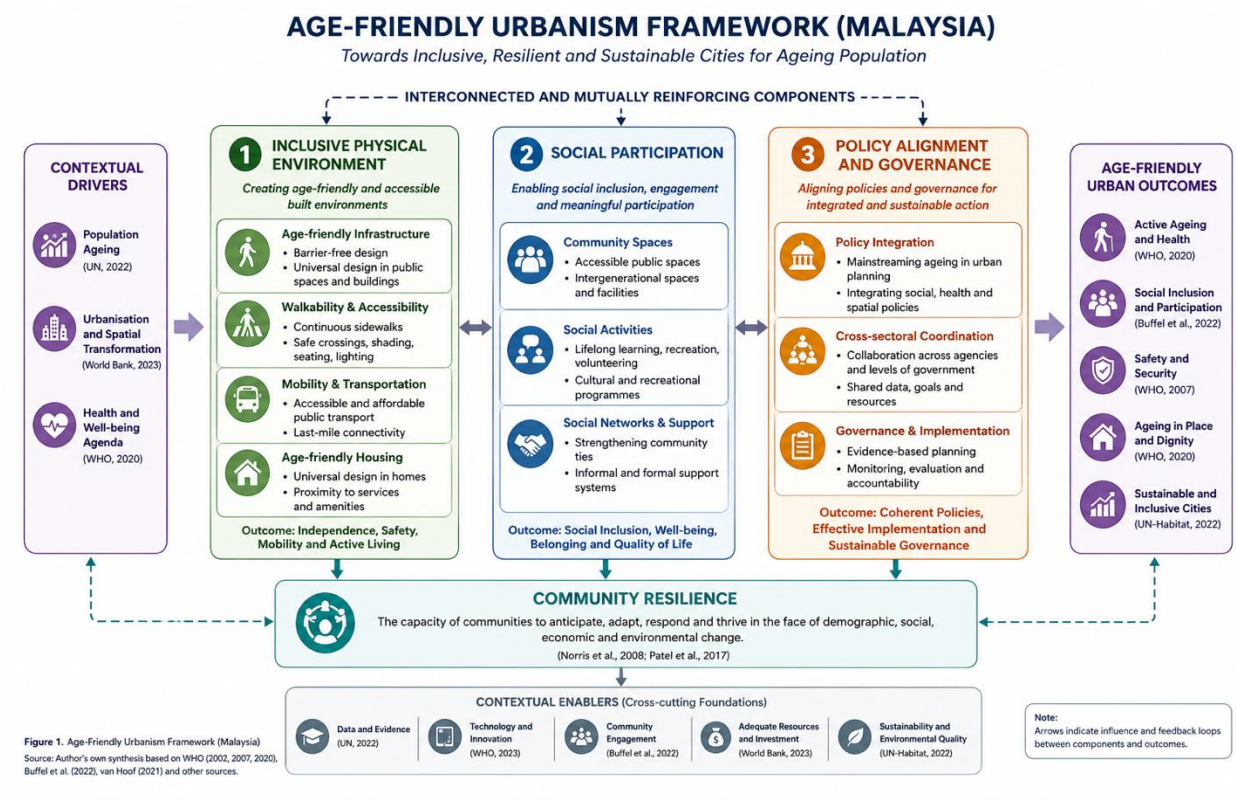

Figure 1. Age-Friendly Urbanism Framework (Malaysia)
Source: Author's own synthesis based on WHO (2002, 2007, 2020), Buffel et al. (2022), van Hoof (2021) and other sources.

6. Policy Implications

The findings of this study highlight the urgent need to reposition age friendly urbanism as a central component of urban policy in Malaysia rather than treating it as a peripheral social concern. Integrating age friendly principles into urban planning requires a fundamental shift in how cities are designed, managed, and evaluated. Current planning practices must move beyond conventional development priorities to explicitly incorporate accessibility, mobility, and inclusivity as core criteria in land use planning, infrastructure development, and urban design guidelines. International frameworks advanced by the World Health Organization emphasise that age friendly environments should be mainstreamed across all

levels of governance to ensure that older adults can remain independent and socially engaged within their communities (World Health Organization, 2020; World Health Organization, 2023). In this regard, urban planning in Malaysia must adopt a more proactive and anticipatory approach that aligns demographic trends with spatial development strategies.

Policy reform is particularly critical in the domains of housing and transportation, which have been identified as key determinants of active ageing. In the housing sector, there is a need to promote design standards that support ageing in place, including universal design features, proximity to essential services, and integration with community networks. Evidence from comparative contexts demonstrates that age sensitive housing contributes significantly to independence, safety, and overall well being among older adults (Yuen and Soh, 2020; World Health Organization, 2007). Similarly, transportation policies must be reoriented to ensure accessibility, affordability, and reliability for ageing populations. This includes improving public transport infrastructure, enhancing last mile connectivity, and ensuring that transport systems are designed to accommodate varying levels of physical ability. Studies have shown that accessible transportation is strongly associated with increased social participation and reduced isolation among older adults, reinforcing its importance as a policy priority (Luiu, Tight, and Burrow, 2017; World Health Organization, 2023). Without such reforms, the gap between policy intent and everyday lived experience will persist.

At the institutional level, the role of local authorities and community actors is crucial in translating policy into practice. Local governments are often responsible for implementing urban policies and managing public spaces, making them key agents in advancing age friendly initiatives. Strengthening the capacity of local authorities through training, resource allocation, and performance indicators related to age friendly outcomes can enhance policy effectiveness. At the same time, community engagement must be recognised as an essential component of policy implementation. Involving older adults and local communities in planning processes ensures that interventions are context sensitive and responsive to real needs, thereby improving both legitimacy and impact (Buffel et al., 2022). This participatory approach also contributes to building social cohesion and community resilience, which are critical for sustaining long term policy outcomes.

Finally, the complexity of population ageing necessitates a whole of government approach that transcends sectoral boundaries and promotes coordinated action across ministries, agencies, and governance levels. Ageing intersects with multiple policy domains including health, housing, transportation, and urban development, and therefore requires integrated policy responses rather than isolated interventions. A whole of government approach enables the alignment of objectives, resources, and implementation mechanisms, ensuring that age friendly principles are embedded consistently across policy frameworks (Howlett and Cashore, 2009). Such an approach also facilitates long term strategic planning and reduces institutional fragmentation, which has been identified as a key barrier in the Malaysian context. By adopting an integrated and collaborative governance model, Malaysia can move towards a more inclusive, resilient, and sustainable urban future that effectively supports active ageing.

5. Conclusions

This study has examined the alignment between urban policy and the principles of active ageing in Malaysia, revealing a persistent gap between policy intentions and spatial realities. The findings demonstrate that while existing policy frameworks recognise the importance of supporting older adults, their implementation remains largely fragmented and insufficiently integrated into urban planning systems. Key challenges were identified in the areas of accessibility, mobility, and housing, where the built environment continues to constrain independence and social participation among older populations. At the same time, structural limitations within governance, including weak coordination across sectors and limited spatial sensitivity in policy design, further exacerbate this misalignment. These findings reinforce the argument that ageing should not be addressed solely as a social or healthcare issue but must be understood as a spatial and urban concern embedded within the broader development agenda (World Health Organization, 2020; van Hoof, 2021).

In light of these findings, this study asserts that age friendly urbanism is no longer an optional policy consideration but a fundamental necessity for sustainable urban development in Malaysia. As the country approaches ageing nation status, the ability of cities to support independence, inclusion, and well being among older adults will become a defining indicator of policy effectiveness and urban resilience. International frameworks and empirical evidence consistently highlight that integrating accessibility, social participation, and supportive environments into urban systems is essential for achieving active ageing outcomes (World Health Organization, 2007; Buffel et al., 2022). Therefore, repositioning age friendly urbanism at the centre of policy and planning is critical for ensuring that cities remain inclusive and adaptable in the face of demographic change.

This study contributes to the literature in two significant ways. First, it advances theoretical understanding by proposing an integrated conceptual framework that links inclusive physical environments, social participation, and policy alignment within a community resilience perspective. This framework extends existing models by explicitly addressing the spatial dimensions of ageing and highlighting the importance of governance integration. Second, the study offers practical policy implications by identifying actionable areas for reform, particularly in housing, transportation, and urban planning coordination. These contributions provide a foundation for bridging the gap between policy aspirations and implementation realities, thereby supporting more coherent and effective policy development in Malaysia.

Future research should build on this study by incorporating empirical data to test and refine the proposed framework in specific urban contexts. Quantitative and mixed methods approaches could be used to examine the relationship between

built environment factors and active ageing outcomes, while qualitative studies may explore the lived experiences of older adults in different urban settings. In addition, comparative research across cities and regions within Malaysia would provide deeper insights into contextual variations and implementation challenges. Such efforts are essential for strengthening the evidence base and informing the development of more responsive, inclusive, and resilient urban policies for an ageing society.

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Conflicts of Interest
The author(s) report no conflicts of interest.

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No new data were created or analysed in this study; all sources are cited within the article.

Institutional Review Board Statement
Not applicable.

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