

Ageing and Social Capital

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Academics, designers and policy makers are coming together in a seminal project to develop planning and design guidelines for ageing friendly neighbourhoods in Singapore.

When referring to an age-friendly neighbourhood, we should use the word “ageing friendly” instead, suggests Dr Belinda Yuen, the research director and programme lead of the Lee Li Ming Programme in Ageing Urbanism at the Lee Kuan Yew Centre for Innovative Cities, Singapore University Technology and Design (SUTD). “Ageing is a process whereas age denotes a label. Ageing is not the end of life, instead, there is a lot to celebrate as one moves on to later years.”

She is leading a seminal 18-month research project that started from July 2017, seeking to understand the connection between the neighbourhood’s built environment and older persons’ social, physical and mental health. For this project, SUTD is also joined by the Geriatric Education & Research Institute, which will provide research on the public health and medical needs of ageing Singaporeans.

Envisioning an ideal ageing friendly neighbourhood, Dr Yuen says it should be welcoming (inclusive for all), walkable, wonderful (with attractive spaces) and warm (referring to human interactions). “Our task is clear,” says Dr Yuen, “to provide the opportunities that encourage older people to get out of the house and to support them in their capacity to use the spaces around them, otherwise they may become housebound. The physical infrastructure and facilities are very important in providing the stage for activities to play out and opportunities for interaction that can help address loneliness and social isolation.”

Something as simple as a bench can become critical. Dr Yuen suggests that benches placed in public spaces in Singapore should be made of materials that are relevant to the local climate, that are comfortable and have arm rests for older people to use to lift themselves up. Placement is also important, along common paths and at short intervals. Even the angles at which they are placed make a difference, as benches facing each other are more conducive for social interaction.

Based on the project scope, Dr Yuen and her team will focus on three neighbourhoods with different population profiles, topography, and land use mix, to provide local quantitative and qualitative insights. They have also undertaken benchmark comparisons with other ageing-friendly initiatives in 10 cities around the world.



A seminal study on ageing-friendly neighbourhoods is looking more closely at shaping and designing engaging spaces for older persons, including places like Coffee Corner at Toa Payoh View, a social gathering space initiated by local champion Philip Phajan Singh.

Dream project

Once the research is completed, it will be used to produce broad planning and design guidelines that can be applied to existing and future neighbourhoods. There may also be opportunities to do post-implementation evaluation of subsequent improvements made within the three selected neighbourhoods. For this reason, Dr Yuen calls it a “dream project.”

“Singapore is the first to approach the issue of ageing-friendly neighbourhoods from research through intervention prototyping to evaluation,” says Dr Yuen. The project brings together academics, policy makers and architects. Funded by the National Research Foundation and Ministry of National Development (under the Land and Liveability National Innovation Challenge) and led by URA, some other partners include the Ministry of Health, Building & Construction Authority, Agency for Integrated Care and Housing & Development Board.

Her team is producing up to 10 deliverables, including an environmental audit toolkit which can be used by planners, architects, local councils or even residents themselves to assess the ageing-friendliness of their neighbourhood spaces. A draft has already been presented to some Town Councils for feedback.



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The Toa Payoh West market and its surrounding spaces have become a focal point for many in the neighbourhood.

Design solutions

The project also includes three architectural firms, CPG Corporation, Tierra Design and Lekker Architects. Each firm has been assigned to focus on one of the three neighbourhoods identified as part of the project, and come up with context specific design solutions.

“An explicit goal of ageing friendly design is to make sure that people's life space mobility doesn't get constricted, the amount that someone is willing and feels enabled to travel beyond their immediate home environment,” says co-founder of Lekker Architects Ong Ker-Shing. This means walkability, benches and places that inspire social interaction are high on her list of priorities. Wayfinding is another.

“These days, everything shouts for your attention,” she says. “There's no quiet fabric that forms the background, similar to what you see in older cities. With redevelopment, it's hard to have a neighbourhood that is both legible in the scale of the buildings and the neighbourhood itself, while retaining recognisable landmarks. That's confusing as you get older, when maybe you forget things or find a lot of information hard to sift out. So one thing we've wondered is whether there can be a simplification of the visual information at a neighbourhood level.”

Tierra Design's co-founder Franklin Po adds: “The dilemma is to understand the neighbourhood and the flows of where people are walking and then to figure out where all the spots are that need to be fixed.” If it were up to him, Franklin says he would do away with every step and level change within the main walkways of the neighbourhood and move all roads and parking to peripheral areas, creating a seamless corridor of green and open spaces that is safe and inclusive for everyone. For exercise, there should be pathways outside of these main pathways to give people more choices.

Social capital

Similar to Dr Yuen and Ong, Po places importance on how people use their neighbourhood spaces to form social connections, observing how residents gravitate to some spaces more than others, and the various ways that spaces are used for ad hoc activities. “Remember, people used to live in kampongs at ground level,” says Po, “so when you put them in apartment blocks, you've changed the social fabric. We want to bring people out from their apartments, back down to ground level. It's a big issue if people don't want to mingle or don't even know who their neighbours are.”



Older persons within the Toa Payoh View neighbourhood have re-purposed common public spaces into their own gathering spots like this one, close to the Toa Payoh West market.

He adds: “We are exploring the difference between designing spaces for people and designing spaces for people to create by themselves,” says Po. “We feel that if we give ownership to people, not just the elderly but people of all ages, then they will actually use these spaces more often.”

It's about building social capital. “What we're trying to do in communities is to build social cohesion and providing amenities that will actually promote people coming together with different interests and to find the kind of interest that they like.”

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Photography by Chee Boon Pin

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