

ISSUE 05 · 2016

Skyline

Insights into planning spaces around us

City hacks

Fresh ways to improve our living environments

Jurong Lake District gears for greater innovation | How to inject life in your neighbourhood



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Cover | Art Installation along Hindoo road at Little India. These 'umbrella trees' are designed by Ms Marthalia Budiman as part of the Urban Redevelopment Authority's 'My Ideas for Public Spaces: Forgotten Spaces' competition in 2015.



Blissful tranquility: The Chinese (above) and Japanese Gardens will be integrated with Jurong Lake Park in future as part of Jurong Lake District. We explore the exciting plans for this district on page 18.

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Creative hacks to public spaces

Turfing over parking lots temporarily or reusing a back alley space for a block party can have a profound impact on the way we interact with each other and our sense of place.

Writer **Justin Zhuang**
Photographers **Wilson Pang and Donn Tan**

Tampines Changkat residents are redesigning their park space. Marsiling Rise seniors have created their own void deck space in SilverCove. And piano enthusiasts have brought piano playing to the streets.

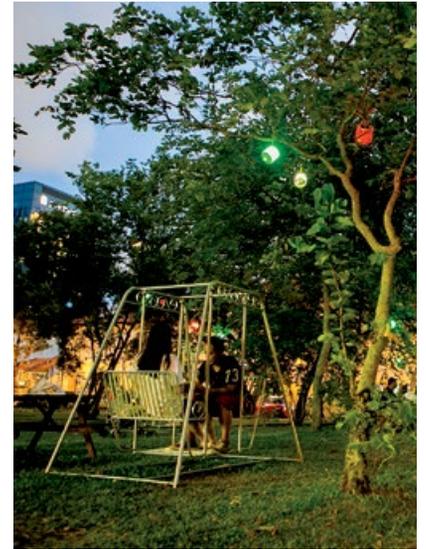
Creative hacks to public spaces are emerging, whether these are re-purposing void deck spaces, the patch of grass opposite our homes or a side alley.

The design and use of such “third spaces” including areas like playgrounds, parks and hawker centres where people interact in are increasingly important for liveable cities, says Deputy Prime Minister Tharman Shanmugaratnam at the World Cities Summit held in Singapore in July 2016. Given that these are public and common spaces used by everyone, citizens and individuals have a major role to play in shaping such spaces, he added.

And more are doing it, with the help of active groups like Participate in Design and COLOURS and programmes like Our Favourite Place.

Co-designing the public space

Involving residents in determining the types of public spaces they want can throw up new ideas, says Jan Lim and Mizah Rahman, founders of Participate in Design, a non-profit group working to empower citizens in co-designing community spaces. They did something different for Tampines Changkat’s Neighbourhood Renewal Programme in 2015





as the then Member of Parliament Irene Ng wanted to involve her residents more.

Instead of just surveying residents and checking off key facilities and spaces as part of upgrading the public housing estate, they got residents to tour their neighbourhood mapping out existing issues and drawing up proposals themselves. And they came up with a whole host of upgrading ideas, including turning part of their park into a nature playground for kids. “If we had started from the survey, unless you had it written down, ‘Park play with nature’, that would not have come up because there was no room for things that did not belong to the standard, such as link ways and pavilions,” says Jan. “But because we had a workshop [with the residents], we had room for innovative ideas.”

How to harness the creativity of communities in designing community spaces themselves has always been on Jan and Mizah’s minds even when they were architecture students at the National University of Singapore. “We were always wondering why we weren’t doing more in our school projects to understand the people around there. Aren’t the people one of the most important things? Especially when you’re talking about architecture and space, when they are the ones using it,” says Jan.

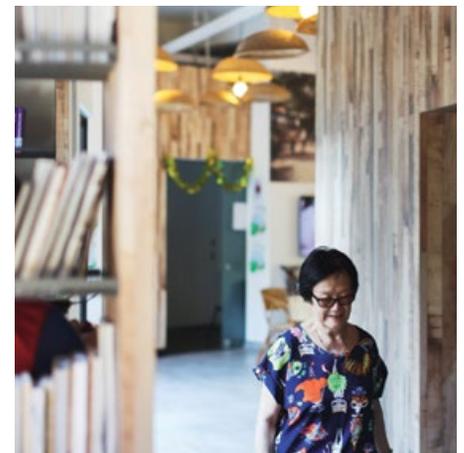
For their Master’s thesis, Jan and Mizah experimented with this idea of co-designing spaces with residents in MacPherson and were hooked. That led to more projects and commissions. And in 2012, Jan left her job in a design studio to start PiD, together with Mizah, now an associate lecturer at Ngee Ann

Polytechnic. Over the last four years, the duo have worked with residents, senior citizens, and even children on other community design projects, while still tackling issues from transport to neighbourliness in MacPherson.

New meaning in ordinary spaces

Founders of Collectively Ours (COLOURS) Chong Keng Hua and Kang Fong Ing see this co-design process as a way for residents to find new meaning in ordinary common spaces around them that can be used to address real issues. Formed in 2013, Keng Hua and Fong Ing, currently an assistant professor and an adjunct assistant professor respectively at the Singapore University of Technology and Design, started COLOURS after their encounters of the “entrepreneurship spirit” in the United States where citizens were actively addressing problems on the ground themselves.

One of their first project was ‘Our City! Safe Streets’ in 2013, a collaboration with Singapore University of Technology and Design students, Participate in Design and ReallyArchitecture (re:ACT). Working with residents, they turned four curbside parking lots along Circuit Road into artificially turfed lots framed by plants and signages for two days as a way of supporting the global PARK(ing) Day movement started in San Francisco. The initiative sought to raise awareness on the need for safer streets, triggered by an incident where a lorry collided with a cyclist at a junction along Circuit Road. The converted lots as community gardens and a safe zone for pedestrians to cross Circuit Road demonstrated the possibility of re-purposing spaces meaningfully.



Ground-up activation

Such conversions of car park lots into purposeful spaces for a day as part of the global PARK(ing) Day has now been extended island-wide, supported by URA from 2014 as a way of inspiring more ground-up interest in activating public spaces everywhere. Because of Our Favourite Place, a URA programme initiated since 2013 to encourage more ground-up efforts to rethink and activate public spaces around us, groups are also taking the initiative to start something on their own.

Play it Forward and local environmental solutions company Innoverde placed pianos and ping pong tables in different parts of the city in 2015 to liven up spaces and bring people together. Yan Chang, a URA architect and one of the co-founders of Play it Forward shares his passion: "In bringing pianos to public spaces, urban spaces become social spaces for

interaction. We have brought together ordinary folk who give away their pianos for a good cause, beneficiaries who can now experience the joy of music with the donated pianos, local artists and designers who lend their creative talents to transform old pianos into art pieces and Singaporeans whose faces light up when their friends play a tune, and musicians now have a place to practise and perform."

Instilling a greater sense of place

Beyond just re-purposing a space, residents who come up with their own designs and solutions also begin to develop a greater sense of place and a stronger desire to want the space to work. This is evident in SilverCove, a senior activity centre in Marsiling Rise that Keng Hua and Fong Ing were deeply involved in. The people behind the design of the centre's health and dental check-up facilities, a senior-friendly gym, a reading corner,

gardening walls and a bright and airy sitting area are some 30 residents living in the studio apartments above. Instead of commissioning a top-down design solution like in previous centres, NTUC Health commissioned COLOURS last year to work with the seniors to design the spaces.

The result is a strikingly different solution despite the similar budget, says the organisation's senior manager Allan Ho. "This is better because it has the input of the residents so they feel that people are listening to their ideas," he says. "Some of them are members because they have went through with us the design from the very beginning."

Pointing to SilverCove's gardening wall of assorted plants, including periwinkles in bloom, Fong Ing adds: "You see the plants, they are doing so well! Even better than those in my house!" As the residents badly wanted a garden in the centre, COLOURS successfully figured a way of turning its 40-centimetres wide window ledge into a platform for gardening. "It's very memorable to see people taking care and continuing the vision that we set," adds Fong Ing. "We only lay the foundation, but the residents are the ones that carry and continue it on."

Breaking down barriers

This sustainability extends to the community itself too. Designing together breaks down barriers amongst neighbours who hardly know one another nowadays, says Jan. Through a survey, PID found that most people in Singapore would solve problems themselves or report it to the authorities, but not work with their neighbours. The reason, Jan speculates, is that people simply hardly know one another or their skills. Working together builds communities and also helps them realise the complexity of issues and see from the perspective of others.

When PID worked with residents of the Geylang East Home for the Aged to enliven a space outside their centre, they soon realised their initial proposal to attract youths was problematic when some in the group pointed out how rowdy they could be. "That was a very pivotal moment not just for us as designers to understand, but for the participants in the group to realise that there are many other points of view and it's not as simple as I want a youth centre," says Jan.

In guiding residents to discover their own solutions, Jan and Keng Hua think it is important to spend time understanding the underlying issues and simply listening to what they have to say. This can be challenging with reticent Singaporeans. Both groups have developed ways to tease out opinions and feedback, for instance,

using scale models and visuals instead of having open discussions that can either turn silent or be dominated by a few vocal figures.

To ensure their efforts are inclusive, the designers also conduct workshops in small groups so that everyone can contribute, and provide accessible materials in different languages for the different ethnicities, seniors and even children to understand. Ultimately, to design with a community is about leveraging on their unique abilities, says Jan. "It's not just looking at the flaws, like what is not working, which is very much a part of the nature of design — what doesn't work, let's fix it. But it's also looking at what already works, and can we create spaces that can use these skills and celebrate them."

Everyone has a part to play

While many question why they should go into an area which is traditionally left to design professionals or the government to address, says Keng Hua. "A lot of times we feel that the responsibility lies with whoever has the authority. That probably is right in the past because we need things to move very fast and solve a lot of urgent issues," he says. Today, "responsibility" needs to be redefined from having the "power to respond" to the "ability to respond", adds Keng Hua, and every one of us can play a part in designing our spaces.

Other government agencies leading the way include the Housing and Development Board, which is working with COLOURS to create the very first void deck with mobile instead of fixed furniture, and even the National Arts Council, which has worked with PID to spread their participatory approach to the arts community too. Such partnerships are vital to ensure cities are designed from both the ground up and on a policy level, says Jan. "Participation is not just about we do our thing and we do it independently. The ideal state is where it is balanced. It's both from the top and the bottom, and people are hand in hand working together."

Interested in activating a public space yourself or working with communities? Reach out:

URA's Our Favourite Place programme
ura.sg/ourfaveplace

Participate in Design
participateindesign.org

Collectively Ours
col-ours.com