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HOUSE 24 BY PARK + ASSOCIATES | GEYER SINGAPORE DESIGN STUDIO | SINGAPORE INDESIGN 2016
WOW ARCHITECTS | OASIA HOTEL DOWNTOWN BY WOHA AND STUDIO PATRICIA URQUIOLA

IN CONVERSATION: KANG FONG ING, DR CHONG KENG HUA AND JOSHUA COMAROFF



PREPARING FOR A SENIORS' CITY

INTERVIEW
PANEL PHOTOGRAPHS
PROJECT IMAGES

» NARELLE YABUKA
» ANGIE NG
» COURTESY OF COLOURS:
COLLECTIVELY OURS, SURGE
AND LEKKER ARCHITECTS

FOR SINGAPORE INDESIGN 2016, A PANEL OF DESIGNERS EXPERIENCED IN THE ISSUES FACED BY SENIORS IN THE BUILT ENVIRONMENT DISCUSSED HOW WELL WE ARE EQUIPPED TO CONCEPTUALISE AND IMPLEMENT AGE-SENSITIVE SETTINGS.

Above: Kang Fong Ing (left) of COLOURS: Collectively Ours, Chong Keng Hua (centre) of SUTD Social Urban Research Groupe (SURGe), and Joshua Comaroff (right) of Lekker Architects



AS PART OF THE 'DESIGN CONVERSATIONS' SERIES of panel discussions held on 8 October 2016 for Singapore Indesign, the session 'Future-Proofing our City for Senior Living' delved into territory that impacts all of us. Ageing is a multi-faceted issue that touches on many areas – health (physical and mental) and healthcare; social and familial interaction; architecture and design; and financial and economic factors. With Singapore facing the rapid ageing of its population, the session aimed to investigate how our built environment can best keep up with the demands placed on it through the informed work of designers and architects. Kang Fong Ing is a partner at COLOURS: Collectively Ours. She is also an Adjunct Assistant Professor of Architecture and Sustainable Design at SUTD. Dr Chong Keng Hua is an Assistant Professor of Architecture and Sustainable Design at SUTD where he leads the Social Urban Research Groupe (SURGe). Joshua Comaroff is a design consultant at Lekker Architects. Presented here is an edited transcript of their discussion, moderated by Narelle Yabuka.

Narelle Yabuka (NY) The terminology used to discuss ageing is varied, and preferences differ in different locations. What are considered to be the most ideal terms to use, and are there any cultural considerations that should be taken into account?

Chong Keng Hua (CKH) We've been doing a lot of research on the ageing population – not just in Singapore but around the Asian region. How to describe the demographic is always an issue for debate. In some literature the term 'seniors' is used, or 'the elderly', 'elders' or 'old people'. But increasingly in recent years we've been trying to avoid some of these terms because nobody thinks they are old. Everyone thinks they're younger than other people. So we try to call them 'older people'.

In Singapore we are less sensitive than some other places. So we can use 'seniors' and 'the elderly', but we have also invented new terms like 'pioneer generation'. In Chinese we call them *le ling*, which means 'happy age'. When you reach retirement you're supposed to be happy. So there are many ways to look at it from different cultural angles. We see culture as a very important factor in how we design.

NY Fong Ing, tell us about COLOURS. What do you do, and why did you set it up?

Kang Fong Ing (KFI) COLOURS is a design consultancy for collaborative public space design. As designers, we realised there's a lot of research on the built environment, such as age-friendly cities. But there's a gap between theory and practice. We created COLOURS to bridge this gap.

NY Give us an overview of the projects by COLOURS that we're seeing on the screen here.

KFI The smallest one is *Flex* – the planter bench. It's very simple, just four blocks with a little planter at the end. You can move it around, stack it up, and make different formations. We placed it randomly in public spaces, like playgrounds and void decks, and we observed how the public used it.

We learned from that and proposed new projects with mobile furniture. We just installed a new one at Jurong. It's seating in conjunction with lighting. We worked with engineers and computer scientists such that the lighting will respond to the way the furniture is placed, so you'll get a different lighting ambience. We're trying to encourage different groups of people to use the space.

NY The other project you're showing is SilverCOVE. For that one I understand you did some participatory design sessions with a group of older people, and then you transformed a void deck into a seniors' activity centre. Let's come back to that project later.

Josh, Lekker has been working on a visioning project for a dementia care centre. Can you tell us about that work?

Joshua Comaroff (JC) We started working with Apex Harmony Lodge four years ago. It's Singapore's only completely dedicated dementia-care centre, and it's publicly funded. It was built about 12 years ago, at a time when dementia care fell under the purview of medical architects – architects who were doing a lot of hospital work. It's a very institutional environment, and in many ways it's been very well planned but in others I think it's not a very hospitable environment to grow old in. You see problems like confusion and disorientation when people are moved there out of their homes, because the environmental contrast is so great.

We've been trying to find ways to domesticate it and bring back other kinds of social and domestic rituals. We find with dementia in general that the minute people are moved out of a home environment and put into hospitals, they tend to decline very fast. So we're trying to create more continuity between the home and Apex. Private space, for example, is put under pressure by the guidelines. So in a way we have to fight against those to come up with better outcomes.

NY So the stage you're at now with the Apex project is that you've analysed the existing conditions, and made suggestions for what could be done to improve the life experience for the residents.

JC That's right.

NY You and your partner Ong Ker Shing are perhaps better known for designing spaces for kids. Why did you start taking on this type of work for the other end of the age spectrum? Are there any overlaps between the considerations that need to be taken into account when you're designing for the young and for older people?

JC Yeah, for us it's a very simple reason. My father-in-law started behaving peculiarly eight or nine years ago. It took a long time for us to realise he had frontal temporal dementia, which in some ways is similar to Alzheimer's but also has other symptoms that are very unusual. It has to do with a neural rewiring of the brain. As he declined, we had been in contact with the Lien Foundation, who were funding agents for some of the preschools we'd been doing. They were starting a series of pilot projects on ageing, and some specifically on dementia care. So it was a natural transition for us. We wanted to do work that had social impact, and this was very close to home.

As we were living with my father-in-law, we realised very minor changes in his environment would have a huge effect on his psychological comfort. If a chair was moved or reupholstered, he didn't want to sit on it. We noticed he was avoiding areas where there was darkness or dark colours. So there were clearly things in the design environment

that affected him. We thought his comfort could be assisted by little things we could do if we were smart enough to know what the cues were.

NY What were some of the considerations COLOURS took into account at SilverCOVE in terms of creating an environment that's conducive to comfortable living for older people?

KFI Before we go into the design itself, I'd like to discuss the principles behind it, as they are also very important. Rather than trying to control people and design things for them, our approach was to see what things would naturally support their behaviour, and then enhance those and empower people to do what they want. Designers always want to be in control. But doing this project, we realised that we need to release some of this control to the user. That's why we pushed very hard for the participatory approach. Our client NTUC Health was quite new to this.

When seniors are active and healthy and among us, all is well and we live comfortably with each other. But when health starts to deteriorate and we need to care for them, walls start to come up. We start to have senior centres, day care and home care. There is a social stigma – a dis-integration between the community and older people. So our vision for COLOURS is to prevent the walls from coming up or to bring them down if we can.

At SilverCOVE, we couldn't break down the walls, so we redesigned the spaces of circulation such that the public can walk through the centre all day – from the bus stop in front to the coffee shop behind. As the community traverses this thoroughfare, they can see what the elderly are doing and spend time there. It's not just a space for the elderly; it's a community space. We believe that's the future of these types of spaces, so you can get rid of the 'needy syndrome' and include the community as part of the empowerment process.

We tried to create diverse programmes within a very tight space at the void deck using modules that can be shifted around. So they have a kitchen, they have karaoke, they can play mahjong, they can watch TV, even play cards and do handicraft. We worked with the library on a reading area, and with NParks to create a gardening facade. These are some of the things we realised were wanted through the workshop.

We recently visited some new centres that have sprung up in the last year, and we saw that the concept of inviting the community to be part of the seniors' spaces has started to gain momentum. We hope to see this method continue.

NY We're also showing on screen here a series of photographs taken by SURGe of void decks, liminal spaces, bird singing et cetera. What prompted you to do this series of photographs?

CKH It was a very painstaking process over the last five years. We combed over the whole of Singapore trying to collect images of all the different kinds of spaces that older people use and appropriate. We realised that you don't really need to design a lot of these spaces; people are designing them.

We could identify several typologies – for example how seniors use void decks, or the spaces outside the first-storey HDB units. In the 1960s, the HDB typology was quite different. The units were smaller but the breakout spaces – the staircase lobbies and lift lobbies – were much bigger. Some of them have been turned into communal kitchens or extra bedrooms. There's a lot of this. It brings different neighbours and the community together. We interviewed people and collected all their stories. We even put together a short documentary.

Some seniors face a lot of issues using these liminal spaces that they don't own. In one instance, the residents put out chairs and tables, and they were always confiscated by the town council. So the



Above: A study drawing by Lekker Architects indicating proposed principals for the refurbishment of the Apex Harmony Lodge dementia-care centre

Top: A photograph from a series by the Social Urban Research Groupe (SURGe) investigating the ways older people use public spaces

Bottom: A public consultation process by COLOURS for the Smart Void Deck project in Jurong, a winning idea from the Greenprint Fund



Top: The SilverCOVE Seniors' Activity Centre, designed by COLOURS, provides spaces in which the community at large may interact with older people

Bottom: The stackable Flex bench system by COLOURS was first trialled at the URA-supported PARK(ing) Day in 2014

residents started a negotiation process, and in the end, because of the overwhelming support from the neighbours, they were able to strike a deal and turn it into a real community space for the whole block to use. This was all done by the residents themselves.

So we start to question things. If they can do that, what is the role of the designer in the future? That's something we are starting to investigate. In more institutionalised spaces, can we incorporate some of this to encourage people to be part of the whole process as well?

NY Currently, in the spectrum of government ministries in Singapore, which ministries do formalised spaces for older people usually fall under? There are so many things to consider when designing a space for older people. Are we able to achieve multi-faceted outcomes?

CKH We are now in the period when we are all trying to find out how to approach this issue. The URA is working on overall planning and several typologies for infrastructure. The Ministry of Health is still taking care of healthcare infrastructure. Besides health issues you have other issues including social and psychological matters. All this can't be tackled by one agency. We need to look at things from a very broad perspective.

Our experience tells us the procurement process for design might have to change, because right now the service providers come in late in the process. A lot of design has been awarded and done before the service provider is engaged, and then the interior designers come in and change everything again. So there's a lot of wasted time and effort.

Why can't the service provider, together with the designer, the ministry and the users, come in from the beginning and start to devise new ways to tackle the problem rather than just looking at the number of patients or beds to cater for? Within 15 years, we'll be a super-aged society like Japan. How can we cater for this large group of seniors, including ourselves, in future? I think the answer lies in ourselves and not in the ministries. It lies in all the sectors – public, private, institutional, social care, everywhere – and in the community. How can the community take care of seniors themselves? This topic is avoided at the moment, but I think it's where we can really start to solve the problem.

NY Then from the perspective of designers and architects, how could our design processes perform better so that we can better address the needs and wellbeing of older people?

JC This is a very interesting subject for us. When we started the Apex project, it was really shocking to benchmark dementia-care centres against examples of senior-care centres in Singapore. There are people who are working very energetically. But

what was amazing to us was how little attention designers were giving to the sector.

I think healthcare architects, who are really good at creating hospitals, are very on top of the senior-care facilities market. They know all the clients and they have ways of doing things. But what about designers who think holistically like COLOURS does about role of seniors in broader society? How do we keep from sending seniors out into very isolated social situations? We found very few designers were focusing on seniors, apart from COLOURS and Lanzavecchia + Wai, who did the amazing *No Country for Old Men* collection of furniture. It was almost like it wasn't cool to design for the elderly in that way.

Designers who are being sensitive could make incredibly small differences in their work to make an enormous difference in people's daily lives – in terms of empowering the elderly. But locally and internationally, we felt it wasn't where designers were putting in their best efforts.

NY Are there ways we can engineer our urban environments to create empowerment opportunities for older people?

KFI The environment can be empowering to the elderly if we don't over design it. We have to design, but not too much. If the elderly can still use their acute sense of awareness of their surroundings, they will ultimately be more mobile and healthier and more likely to continue living within our communities.

CKH We were in Korea doing case studies, and we went to this place called Jangsu, which means 'longevity'. More than 60% of the people are elderly. That place has a really steep hill, and the seniors go up and down the hill every day. In Japan there is a care centre full of obstacles. So people have to navigate around, bend down, be careful of the floor. They become really attentive to the environment. They have to be alert and they continue to be physically active. They can live a much healthier life.

Perhaps there's something to learn from these examples about how we can design for seniors. Are we overdesigning? Are we over-providing universal design? That's not to say that we shouldn't do universal design. But when we go to the extreme such that there's no challenge for people anymore, they become less independent. That's something we really need to be mindful about.

JC Yeah, I think there's a tendency toward nannying. We were talking before about the overlap between childcare and elder care. One of the things we noticed that's very different in Japan versus Singapore is the idea that a certain amount of calculated, tolerated risk is important to keep people independent, active and strong.

For example, there was a beautiful Japanese eldercare home we saw. You know in toyshops you see those spongy things – like a ball but it's made of a lot of rubber feelers? They hung those from the ceiling at just the height where seniors will bump their foreheads if they're not looking. It won't hurt them but it teaches them to be aware of their environment. And the centre is on two levels. In Singapore, everything would ideally be on one level, zero steps, no grade change. And what's more, they substituted the staircase railings. They have a regular railing and a rope railing, which is unstable. So as people are walking up the stairs, the carers try to get them to hold on to that rope railing as long as possible so they're a little bit destabilised.

The idea is that you have to challenge people as opposed to just saying, 'Ok you're in your senior years and just declining now, so we're just going to make things as comfortable as possible,' which is much more of a disability or medical model. And we see the same things with kids.

NY We've run out of time too quickly!

JC Just one quick last point – when we design for seniors, we often leave them completely out of the

process. That's why COLOURS' methodologies are great. You guys are more like 'empathologists' – it's about participation and observation. You work with people. You get their feedback. You hear their ideas. Our seniors are full of ideas. They will tell you if they think your work is bad in their own terms. We have to trust them and consult with them more, and stop putting them out to pasture. We need to take on their whole lifetime of experience and find ways to bring them back with us as collaborators and co-designers.

CKH That's what I call creative ageing. We are working on a book about that now, collecting all these cases where you can find that collectively, older people are very creative. So how can we nurture that, learn from it, and bring it back into the built environment? That's what we really want to pay attention to.

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"WE FOUND VERY FEW DESIGNERS WERE FOCUSING ON SENIORS. IT WAS ALMOST LIKE IT WASN'T COOL TO DESIGN FOR THE ELDERLY IN THAT WAY."

» JOSHUA COMAROFF



Above: Photos by SURGe documenting the colonisation of void decks and the use of liminal spaces outside HDB homes