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Is Singapore Ageing Well?

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Are facilities the future of aged care in Singapore? Or is it something else? What are the challenges Singapore faces in terms of assuring the wellbeing of our ageing population into the future? We brought together four experts in ageing issues to discuss how we might age well.

Opposite (from left): Janice Chia is the Founder and Managing Director of Ageing Asia, and the Founder of ASPIRE55. Dr Chong Keng Hua is an Assistant Professor at Singapore University of Technology and Design (SUTD), and Principal Investigator at the Social Urban Research Group (SURGe). Kang Fong Ing is Co-founder and Partner at COLOURS: Collectively Ours. Dr Wong Sweet Fun is the Chief Transformation Officer, Deputy Chairman of the Medical Board, and Clinical Director in Population Health & Community Transformation at Khoo Teck Puat Hospital and Yishun Health.





Asih Jenie (AJ) Let's talk about the statistics of Singapore's ageing population. What are some of the numbers you're most concerned about?

Dr Wong Sweet Fun (WSF) Generally the reported statistics tend to dwell on the negatives: years of disability, living long but poorly, and so on. So it creates an image of seniors as problems that need to be solved. I'm more concerned with the way statistics are presented. Why not balance the statistics with the strengths that these seniors bring with them?

Dr Chong Keng Hua (CKH) I agree. In our research, through interviews and workshops, we see that there's actually a lot of positivity, but it hasn't been really nurtured through this kind of discussion. How do we measure some of these other kinds of results? Ageing can be looked at as something positive that we can harness.

Janice Chia (JC) I think we should measure silver GDP – the economic contribution of people over the age of 60. Maybe that will present things in a more positive light, showing that ageing overlaps every sector of our economy. It's not just about healthcare issues, ageing is a social and economic opportunity. But right now it's almost as if when you hit 60, you're no longer an asset. We need to build up the storyline that people are contributing to society across all ages. For example, people who are caregivers to their grandchildren are still contributing to the economy.

Kang Fong Ing (KFI) Contributing to the economy is traditionally measured by income, but sometimes seniors' contributions to society are not monetary. So there isn't a real measuring tool.

JC Sometimes it's monetary as well. We're seeing a lot of older people leaving the workforce but engaging in consulting roles, flexible employment, or setting up small businesses. We could encourage the micro-entrepreneurship of older people.

KFI For seniors, being around friends, having fun and having someone listen to their stories are some of the things they look forward to. These are simple activities which bring communities

together, but unfortunately, they are intangible statistics.

CKH Social contribution is something that our research is looking at – how seniors contribute to their communities, just by being there. For example, take this Smart Void Deck space here. Every morning, between 10am and 12 noon, you will see a group of senior residents here. And then after 2pm another group will come. By socialising here, seniors create neighbourliness.

We ran a survey in this area. Over 600 people responded, and about 24 per cent of those were aged 60 and above. Our analysis of the results shows that the likelihood of certain things happening based on age groups. For example, compared to the younger generation, seniors are two or three times more likely to greet others in public spaces, chat with their neighbours and join neighbourhood activities. Looking at these levels of interaction, you can see that seniors are much more able to create cohesiveness and social resilience.

JC I find the generation that is about 80-plus are more sociable than those who are 70-plus and 60-plus. My generation is not very sociable. It seems like each generation is less neighbourly than the previous one. Is it because our grandparents' generation was from the *kampung* and they're used to open doors and sitting together?

CKH Yes, seniors are the catalysts in bringing back some of this 'kampungness' to the HDB environment. It relates to memory. That's why we started a research project at SUTD with the HDB called New Urban Kampung. We are not trying to recreate an actual *kampung*; we're looking at how, in an urban setting and a more contemporary way, we can bring back some of this spirit – not just for older people, but for everyone.

KFI The *kampung* spirit is a cultural phenomenon. This kind of thing can be very hard to measure.

WSF At Khoo Teck Puat Hospital, we've also looked at creating spaces that are like community living rooms where people can interact. People ask me, how do you prove that it's beneficial?

Above: Janice Chia with a group of members at an ASPIRE55 activity session. Photo courtesy of ASPIRE55. Opposite: A proposal from COLOURS: Collectively Ours' book *Second Beginnings: Senior Living Redefined*, which was commissioned by the Lien Foundation. The book presents ideas for how new types of spaces could meaningfully engage Singapore's growing population of seniors. 'Heartland Kaki' for example is a new housing typology featuring wide corridors and 'left-over' or unused public spaces (especially at the edges of residential floors) that can be used communally.



“If everybody wants to age in their own homes, but we continue building more facilities, then at some point we might become like Japan where there’s an excess. We might need to start making sure that whatever we're building today...can be converted easily to different functions in future.”

Janice Chia

It's very hard with scientific and academic study methods. I see that the people are smiling, active and talking to each other. They come every day. So what are you measuring that tells you that it's not working?

Once you translate it into numbers, it looks like it's not making a significant difference. But what's happening on the ground is extraordinary. So I was looking for a smile-o-meter. How do you measure smiles? Because if you can, then you can see that people who use the space do smile more than those who don't.

More recently I've been measuring the appearance of track shoes. Previously, the aunties would come down in their slippers. But because they are more active now, they have changed their home clothes into sportswear and track shoes. So I've been counting track shoes. I do have to look for some new ways to measure how well men use the spaces. But to start with, if the number of men increases it's good. Men have their haunts. They will go to places where they can play chess, or drink, or share a newspaper, talk about politics. They're safe, reliable spaces – regular spaces that people know. **CKH** As designers we will typically want to create spaces with beautiful, clean aesthetics, but that may not work well for the ageing population. So where do we draw the line as designers? We need to say, "Hey, we want to design something really useful and practical."

WSF And meaningful.

CKH Yes, meaningful for people. It requires a reconceptualisation of what a design means.

KFI The conceptual designs that COLOURS has been working on try to capture some of this. Like lots of daylight – that's one of the things older people look for.

AJ So do you think there's enough discussion of the ageing population and aged care in Singapore?

CKH There's more conversation starting. After Lien Foundation launched our book *Second Beginnings*, *The Straits Times* publicised it and then we had feedback from the public with their own ideas in response to ours.

JC We are starting to see a mindset shift towards ageing. Changing values of filial piety mean that we don't just want to look after our older people, but we want to enable and support them to do the things they love. A new generation of older people is also looking for more independence as they age, and to age in place – in familiar surroundings and within a community that they are familiar with. As such, there will be a rising demand for more innovations and ideas that will enable ageing within the community.

KFI We're looking at the potential of some of the public's ideas. A lot of people liked the idea of converting the old school, which has even been recently discussed in parliament.

JC In terms of city infrastructure, Singapore has been built to enable ageing in place and to support the development of naturally occurring retirement communities. We just need to be more creative and supportive of how we enable the conversion about the use of existing buildings, like the old school that could become a community for older people. For successful communities to develop, we also need to be clear about how we will run the services within the old school.

KFI There are other agencies that have started to approach us and talk to us about how to carry on all these ideas from the book. I think for something to move forward, it needs a few agencies to be involved. I'd also like to highlight that this is a departure from the traditional method. Currently, the planning authorities will build a facility first. After they finish building, then they will open it up to the operators. After that, the designers come to redo things.

WSF And then the seniors come in and say, "We like this, we don't like that."

CKH So we are trying to conceive new processes for designing such facilities, where all parties are in conversation to mould things from the start.

JC We could moot the idea of a 'smart ageing communities' competition where citizens of all ages are involved in contributing ideas that will make their own communities come to life, and where the prize money is allocated on a community level to implement the ideas. Residents who came up with the ideas will be mentored by government or care sector leaders in order to access the funding.

KFI We could share about our project in Ang Mo Kio with TOUCH Community Services as an example of community involvement. It's the 'Community Pocket' typology from the book. In this project we're trying to integrate the outdoor and the indoor because during our community workshop, the residents gave us feedback, "Why are they taking away our public space?" So rather than taking it away, we're giving them more space as we open up the void deck to the surrounding green so the programme can flow out.

But going through the planning submission, the authorities said they'd never come across anything like this before. Everybody was very supportive of the idea, but how would we go about the approval process?

CKH Within the government policy, how could we create that? Sometimes the different agencies have conflicting regulations.



Opposite (top and bottom): From the *Second Beginnings* book, COLOURS: Collectively Ours' proposal for a 'Community Pocket'. This idea for a hangout space for seniors at an HDB void deck is currently under construction in Ang Mo Kio with TOUCH Community Services. Pages 54-55: The furniture at the 'Smart Void Deck' encourages a relaxed use of the space, supporting leaning positions.



High-Performance Void Deck

The 'Smart Void Deck' at Block 224, Jurong East Street 21 is a community-focused initiative by COLOURS: Collectively Ours. This prototypical public space initially integrated smart lighting, sensors and a suite of mobile furniture, with the lighting condition responding to the changing layout of the furniture and the presence of people in the space. A new set of modular furniture was recently installed – heavier but still moveable – having been selected by community members from a range of options.

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“In a lot of our initiatives, we have started to change the language. So we’ll say ‘wellness *kampung*’ instead of ‘senior centre’. We don’t turn away younger people.”

Dr Wong Sweet Fun

JC It’s about raising awareness. Once we have some successful case studies of ground-up community projects, we will be able to engage the media and government.

KFI Well, we slowly ploughed our way through, talking to people one by one. It’s been a very slow process, but it’s been meaningful. When it’s finished, it will set a precedent.

AJ Are facilities the future of ageing here in Singapore?

CKH It’s more complex than just building a facility for people.

Programming, policy, space – they all have to come together.

JC I see a lot of facilities around the world. They’ve been changing over the last ten years – getting smaller. You don’t see Japan building large-scale nursing homes for over 500 beds. They’re building environments for 120 to 200 people in a community setting – in an apartment block for example. Or they’ll merge a couple of terrace houses together, and then it becomes a place for 60 people. I’m seeing built environments that integrate the broader community too. The celebration of festivals inside these environments helps.

WSF What people really want is communal living – a platform to share their lives. Individual families have limited resources, so when they’ve all gone to work and school and the older people are left at home, there’s no more communal living. What they then yearn for is to come to a space where they can share their lives.

We translate that wrongly thinking that they want a facility where somebody will look after them. And they want to have a choice. They still want to do what they like in the space. A facility that has rules, regulations and schedules doesn’t allow for freedom, and that’s not what they want. They want ageing in communities, not just ageing in place. We need to cut down social isolation.

CKH Yes, ageing in community is the whole concept behind our new book, *Creative Ageing Cities*. Dr Wong contributed a chapter too. It’s trying to shift the paradigm from ageing in place to ageing in community, so people can stay connected. But there’s no one-size-fits-all solution across cultures.

WSF If we’re able to develop the whole residential ecosystem into a space that people feel safe to come out into, they’ll consider it as an extension of their home. You don’t need to isolate them into care communities.

AJ Janice, based on your experience and your endeavours, what are some of the opportunities and challenges of aged care in Singapore?

JC As we hit the population ageing curve, we’ll see a lot more people leaving the workforce to look after their ageing parents because they don’t want to see them institutionalised. And that’s going to result in a workforce productivity issue in the long run.

I think the other challenge is the fact that if everybody wants to age in their own homes, but we continue building more facilities, then at some point we might become like Japan where there’s an excess. We might need to start making sure that whatever we’re building today for our ageing population can be converted easily to different functions in the future, creating a sustainable and functional ecosystem.

We really need to look at the challenges of manpower. Apart from attracting more manpower to the long-term care sector, we also need to look at the job scope, the career progression and also the adoption of technology in the sector.

Also, we need to look at lowering the length of stay in long-term care facilities. We need to enable older people to extend their healthy life years and independence. Apart from manpower, the costs of looking after each older person in a facility are high.

CKH Do you feel that we are not really exploring all the different models in Singapore? That we are just fixated by one or two, such as studio apartments?

JC I think we should have more public-private discussions and collaborations. But things are evolving and I can see that engagement with the government has increased every year. However we need to drive the message further to the private sector to think in a collaborative manner and to see the rise of the ageing population as a socio-economic opportunity. We need to encourage more innovations and try new models of housing and care services.

AJ You offer a ‘virtual retirement village’ through ASPIRE55. Could you explain what that is?

JC It’s a wellness community that focuses on health. I believe that for an older person to age well, they have to be independent, be healthy, and have dignity. Our entire community is about 3,000 people. We support members so they can age well at home. So first we look after their health, then we organise events and activities. And as people age, we help them to modify and improve their home circumstances. If one day they need help, we’ll bring the care services and housekeeping services. We’re also building clubhouses.

WSF I think the biggest challenge is labelling. When we label people of a certain group, we make them behave like that. If we don’t change the language, we can’t change their mindset. If I’m labelled as young or I’m old, I start to box myself up into that stereotype. We are telling people how they should behave.

In a lot of our initiatives, we have started to change the language. So we’ll say ‘wellness *kampung*’ instead of ‘senior centre’. We don’t turn away younger people. For a simple nutrition program, we don’t say it’s a ‘frailty prevention program’, we call it ‘Share A Pot®’. So now anyone can come and share. It could be a pot of soup, a pot of rice, a pot of friendship. So we start to open up the language to be more inclusive. Instead of labelling that constrains people, you use labelling that will open things up.

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