

## CLC Lecture Series

# From Care to Lifestyle: A City for all Ages

URA Function Hall, Singapore  
13 September 2012

The traditional paradigm of infrastructure for the elderly regards them as needing care, with “good care” being defined as a medical, well-designed facility.

On 13 September 2012, as part of the CLC Lecture Series, Dr Emi Kiyota broke this convention by asking the audience of developers, city planners and policy makers to look at the elderly as assets, and to build a place which gives them a good lifestyle, integrated with the rest of the community.

The environmental gerontologist spoke on the benefits of the concept she founded after spending months living with elderly folks in a long-term care facility for senior citizens. While the staff at the centre did all they could to take care of the elderly residents, Dr Kiyota found that many of them were still lonely, bored and experienced helplessness and desperation.



“I know many of you are designers, but I tell my designer friends, don’t overdesign. Leave some imperfections, leave the users of the community to decide what they need,” she said.

She cites, for example, the bamboo poles which act as handrails for a home for the elderly in Japan. These poles are not as hardy as metal rails, and need to be replaced every six months. But they blend in better with the natural surroundings of the home – and they involve volunteers and the community.

She contrasted this with a series of words about how care for the aged is usually regarded as a “Nursing home”, “Elderly facility”, “Day care centre”. “Now, how many of you are excited about your old age?” she asked, to laughter from the audience.

## **Integrating senior citizens into society**

Ageing is an issue that many cities in the world face today – how to cater to the swelling ranks of elderly people in their midst. The UN Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific estimates that in 2050, 4 in 10 people in Asia will be above the age of 60, compared to just 1 in 10 now. The swelling silver group will also translate into higher health care costs for governments in these countries, estimated to double and even triple their health wage bills.

In Singapore, the Government estimates that there will be 600,000 people above the age of 65 by 2020 and this would mean needing to recruit four times the number of people currently working in the eldercare sector. By 2015 it will become the country with the fourth highest number of old people in the world, where the average age of its population will exceed 60 by 2050.

Given the preoccupation with the increase in public spending, it is no wonder that when a city and its people talk about taking care of the elderly within the community, the view is that senior citizens need care - be it physical or psychological. Providing that care for them has traditionally meant providing good and affordable health care through adequate medical and elderly-care facilities. However, Dr Kiyota urged the audience to regard senior citizens as assets who can be tapped on for their wisdom, rather than as liabilities who strain the public health care system.

Given this, a community should be built to include the elderly, rather than segregating them from the other age groups. It should tap on their experience, values and needs and integrate multi-generations all into one eco-system.

Showing case studies of different communities with the elderly, she used the word “Ibasho” to capture this. Loosely translated from Japanese, Ibasho means “a place where you can feel like yourself”. The concept thrives on the belief that even as a person ages, he or she is able to feel useful and valued.

On the importance of infrastructure, she noted that the integration of the elderly into the community required planning which took into account, not just design and engineering principles, but also the thinking and tastes of the users.

Even the most luxurious, well-furnished and fully-equipped centre will not make the elderly people happy if they have neither community nor value.

Noting that senior citizens in Africa living in grass huts who got to play with their grandchildren every day were happier than those living in swanky old folks' home, Dr Kiyota believes that the elderly should be allowed to live more “authentic” lives when they grow old.

While senior citizens should be realistic about changes that need to be made to their lifestyles due to ageing, they should not be cut off from their usual way of life.

In her talk, Dr Kiyota focused on how infrastructure can support inclusive ageing.

### **A Japanese cafe with the ‘Ibasho’ Concept**

Showing slides of the aftermath of the massive tsunami that wrecked the eastern coast of Japan, she revealed that many families were left homeless and lived in temporary

housing projects. The senior citizens who survived the huge waves were found to be more depressed over the new living conditions as they felt there was no way to rebuild their lives.

The Ibasho concept was applied in the Iwate province, which was one of the worst-hit areas. An Ibasho cafe was set up beside a temporary housing-community site in the city of Ofunato and serves as a place for people of all ages in the community to meet and discuss ideas over some simple food and drinks. At these meetings, the whole community discusses community issues and plan, tapping on the senior citizens' insights to shape the community they live in.



The project involved senior citizens working together with others in their community from across all age groups to set up and run the cafe. The seniors also run a service where they help each other with daily chores such as grocery shopping and baby-sitting. The cafe also has a corner set aside where elderly volunteers conduct basic health checks on other senior citizens.

It provides a chance for the elderly to play an active role in the cafe and allowed them to contribute what they could, thus highlighting their abilities, rather than their disabilities, and making them feel useful. The cafe adopts the theme of "Wisdom of the Elders" to reinforce the values of respecting the knowledge and insights that come with years of experience and interactions among different generations.

This notion of integration clearly resonated with the audience who brought this up during the question and answer session. One participant, who worked in Shanghai for eight years, related how he saw older people enjoy themselves while taking care of their grandchildren in the playground.

Exercise facilities for older people were also constructed beside this playground. In contrast, he observed that many older folks whom he saw in nursing homes within the same vicinity were disgruntled and often complained about their children.

"Older people like their grandchildren more than their children. Why? Because they are empowered by their grandchildren," he said, urging the design committee to take integrated living seriously.

This is not always easy as one participant noted, with the recent "not in my backyard" issue, where some Singaporeans protested the building of nursing homes near their flats.

Ms Charlotte Beck, Senior Director of the Elderly and Disability Group at the Ministry of Community Development, who moderated the Q & A session, said that she was “more optimistic” about the issue.

Recounting what she saw overseas, she said that book stores, cafes and a gym were built into facilities for the elderly so that others who lived in the area visited the facility too.



“It was a very natural traffic flow...not contrived at all,” she said, contrasting this with the “volunteer week” sort of activities which sees the obligatory Chinese dances during the Chinese New Year.

Another issue raised was the high proportion of foreigners who serve as caregivers for the elderly in Singapore. This was contrasted with the case in Japan where many were locals, and hence had little communication or cultural barriers.

Replying, Dr Kiyota said frankly: “Japan is in denial.” Like many other countries, such as Singapore and America, it too needs immigrants to help, she said, but it just has not come to terms with doing so.

Citing her work in Washington, where many caregivers were not locals, she agrees that some immigrants were not able to read or speak English well. But the “sense of compassion” she argued, was most important, and is a universal language.

### **Mixing Ages**

Wrapping up, Dr Kiyota urged the design community to take up the challenge of thinking more for the benefits of the elderly. Some questions that should be considered include: How do you fit senior citizens into a limited space? How do you put them in a place that they would like to live in?

If society can embrace this notion of integrated living, it is not only the elderly who benefits. Society as a whole benefits because it is low cost, encourages volunteerism and builds social capital within the community.

## About the Speaker

**Dr Emi Kiyota**, an environmental gerontologist and organisational culture change expert, focuses on initiatives to improve the quality of the built environment for long-term care and ageing services.

Emi is a consultant to numerous age-friendly design projects for senior housing, hospitals, and clinical-care centres in the United States, Europe, Asia and Africa. Dr Kiyota is also a frequent speaker on these issues to audiences of both academics and practitioners. In addition to her consultant work on quality improvement in the built environment for long-term care and ageing services, Emi holds great concern for the similar needs of elders in the developing world. To this end, Emi and a group of like-minded colleagues have created a new not-for-profit, international organisation entitled Ibasho, embodying the Japanese concept of "a place where one feels at home being oneself."

Dr Kiyota is awarded a Bellagio Fellowship for a one-month residency on an 'Innovative Response to Global Aging' from the Rockefeller Foundation. She plans to further develop her idea on creating a process for community planning that embraces and engages elders for the benefit of all.

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