

# Challenging ageism

Emi Kiyota's Ibasho café is placing the elderly at the centrestage of leading resilient communities. Could this be applied to Singapore?

Writer Serene Tng

Behind Ibasho café is a group of energetic community elders who not just serve you tea, they run a farmer's market, a noodle shop and have organised over 300 events, bringing together 11,000 visitors and residents in two years. The café was founded on the premise that everyone wants to be useful to others regardless of age, social status, physical or cognitive capabilities. According to its founder, Dr Emi Kiyota, a quote she found in an elementary school in Bhutan sums up its essence: "the time to be happy is now, the place to be happy is here, and the way to be happy is to make others happy".

The café was started in 2011 as a response to the desire to rebuild communities after the Great East Japan Earthquake destroyed major parts of Ofunato, a city in the Iwate prefecture in Japan. It was the elders living in the area who wanted to do something meaningful in giving back to their community. The Ibasho Sozo Project, a non-profit group was formed and within two years, the community elders successfully led and ran an informal gathering space, overseeing all aspects of its operations from planning to finance. Since the café was completed in June 2013, all generations have connected to the space, with children coming to read books in the library, older people teaching the young and younger people helping elders navigate technology and more. Emi shares with *Skyline* how cities can build communities that integrate and value its elders.

## Why start the café?

More than one in 10 people are over 60 years old today. By 2050, one in five people will be over 60 and 80 percent of these will be living in developing countries. With the simultaneous rise in the number of elderly and in climate-related natural disasters, societies worldwide are facing two critical challenges – caring for an unprecedented number of elderly in our society and reducing their vulnerability from disasters.

Our common perception of ageing is that the elderly are generally a vulnerable group. There is a sense of social isolation, of irrelevance, a loss of dignity and respect. This perception is not sustainable financially. If we continue to marginalise older people and treat them solely as a vulnerable group to be cared for, the demographics alone will





OPPOSITE AND ABOVE (TOP) | ELDERS AT THE IBASHO CAFÉ TRANSFER THEIR KNOWLEDGE TO THE YOUNGER GENERATION AND KEEP LOCAL TRADITIONS ALIVE THROUGH ACTIVITIES SUCH AS VEGETABLE FARMING, TEACHING TOY MAKING AND RUNNING A NOODLE SHOP. ABOVE (BOTTOM) | A JAPANESE ELDER VISITS THE IBASHO FARM IN ORMOC, PHILIPPINES TO HELP IMPROVE IT. PHOTO CREDIT: YASUHIRO TANAKA



bankrupt economies around the world. The Ibasho concept offers an innovative low-cost option in response to this ageing challenge. It recognises the value and resources that elders can bring being part of the solution, not only to ease economic pressures but to also live their lives with dignity and purpose. It also builds up the community's resilience and its ability to withstand shocks such as disasters and ageing by creating a strong informal support system where the elders become the catalyst to strengthen bonds among community members of all ages.

**What is the value of multi-generational interactions?**

As part of my graduate research, I chose to live with elders in long term care facilities to understand their needs. I noticed that while the staff did their best to provide the residents with a safe place to live, the elders still experienced feelings of loneliness, boredom, helplessness and desperation. No one really plans to or wants to live in a long term care facility.

This brings up difficult questions – would I be comfortable with having my loved one in this situation when the time comes? Would I be able to face these living conditions myself? Unfortunately, ageing is not an option. It is a natural part of our lives that nobody can avoid. So, what can we do to improve people's lives in their later years? It's not about ensuring that we have luxury or beautiful buildings. These will not make people happy. The elders living in grass huts in Africa with children at their feet are often happier than those living in assisted homes with a chandelier over their heads.

In creating a non-institutional environment filled with multi-generational interactions, the elders are not treated as people who need to be cared for but have opportunity to contribute to their community as valuable resources. There is much discussion about recognising the value of the elderly and the benefits of multi-generational interactions; however, its implementation is still a challenge. Ibasho demonstrates a practical option that is elders led, low-cost, with the potential to strengthen the social ties of people of all ages.

**What does it take to make it work?**

We need to firstly see the elderly as part of the solution, empowering them to be able to lead and

run programmes effectively, while providing them with the support they need to develop those skills, especially in the early stages of development and operation. It is important to define the role of the experts to serve as facilitators for the elders to create their own place and programme, enabling them to become fully integrated as active participants and leaders. Involving the younger generation in the development and operational processes is also important in making it attractive for them to be part of the community.

The physical environment plays a part as well in fostering a sense of place and ownership. Walkability is crucial given the limited mobility amongst the elderly community. There should be easy and inexpensive access to the place. To ensure the success and long term viability of such a project, the community must find ways to involve the local government without compromising its community led approach. Part of the process is also about changing the mindsets about ageing even amongst the elderly and encouraging a strong support system.

**What surprises you about the perceptions of the elderly at the start?**

Ageism is deeply rooted in our society including amongst the elders themselves. Society perceives ageing as a negative thing and expects elders to be people who need to be looked after by the government. There is a sense of dependency among elderly for the government to provide all the necessary services. They are conditioned to think and behave in certain ways, suffering from a lack of self-worth. When forming the non-profit group to run the Ibasho cafe, a 67 year-old man commented to me: "Aren't we too old to start an organisation?"

**What can we learn from this?**

During the development phase of the project, it dawned on me that there are not many opportunities for the elderly to contribute their skills back to society. But actually every one of us has something to offer and share, whether young or old. The elders running a self-sustainable operation in the café within the Ibasho principle framework have exceeded our expectations. The elderly have a lot to offer and bring to the table. They have a wide network from their professions and through the

young people they have mentored, including a deep connection with the local community. They bring valuable experience and skills, having gone through a lot of hardships in their lives. An elderly woman's comment to me sums up the sentiments of the elders who participated in the project: "I am so glad that I am involved in the Ibasho project because I don't have to feel helpless anymore."

#### **What are your future plans for the Ibasho cafe?**

We have so far started the Ibasho café in two locations, the first one in a disaster area in Japan and the second one in Ormoc, Leyte, Philippines, an area affected by Typhoon Haiyan. I hope to be able to replicate our approach globally. Our goal is to create a global support network amongst the elders who are involved in the Ibasho project. In this network, we can facilitate peer-to-peer exchange programmes to learn from and help each other.

We would also like to develop training programmes for the elderly to take on leadership roles to set up the Ibasho project within communities in their countries. We are currently in discussion with local municipalities in Japan, public housing operators in the United States, and a local community in Nepal to develop the Ibasho café as a community driven initiative to enable local elders to age in community. We would also like to explore setting up Ibasho café-type social spaces in Singapore.

The peer-to-peer exchange programmes can have a significant impact particularly on those who are able to share and impart knowledge from their experience of running the cafe. An elder from the Ibasho café who was involved in helping to set up the Ibasho café in the Philippines shared: "I've always thought that helping people in other countries is beyond us. But I realise that we don't have to be part of the United Nations or international organisations to make a difference. Any one of us can be useful and be of help. We have received so much help from others in rebuilding our communities that now is our turn to do something for the people in the Philippines. There is a lot I want to do with them and to learn from them. I hope we can help each other for a long time."

#### **What can planners and designers learn from this, in addressing the issue of ageing in cities?**

Creating spaces and places for people to gather in an informal setting is important in building up resilient communities and providing the elderly with a sense of purpose. From the project, we found that Ibasho users had more friends, a higher sense of self-efficacy and belonging to their community. We need to find ways to continuously bring the younger and older generations together, fostering a culture where they can learn from one other. We need to start breaking down age-segregated places, for example childcare centres or the libraries. We need to ensure that such spaces and communities are all inclusive, to include and link up to people who are dissimilar or from other communities.

The quality of our physical environments does matter although the environment alone by itself



does not address all of the ageing challenge. But the environment itself does have a strong impact on how we view and behave in relating to each other. Many of the ageing related service buildings tend to have a certain institutional look and feel that may signal that the environment is more for the elderly. In designing spaces where the elderly will gather, we need to be mindful to design spaces that break down the barriers, to make the environment as attractive, comfortable and safe as possible. It is also important to empower and include the elders throughout the design, construction and programme development and operation to strengthen a sense of ownership of the place. Because the elders at the Ibasho café were so deeply involved in the design and process, they were so proud to bring their friends and families around.

Community-driven projects like the Ibasho café cannot solve all the issues related to global ageing or the vulnerability of elders during and after natural disasters. But such projects give the elderly power and self-determination, showing that they have much to give and can foster greater engagement amongst all members of the community. By creating a place where elders can help their neighbours, the Ibasho café has made the community stronger and more integrated. The Ibasho approach offers a long-term sustainable model of incorporating elders more fully into their communities that can enrich their lives. It presents a nuanced way to build up more resilient communities.

*More information on the Ibasho café can be found on [www.ibasho.org](http://www.ibasho.org).*

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