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DR CHONG KENG HUA, CO-FOUNDER OF DESIGN CONSULTANCY COLOURS: COLLECTIVELY OURS, TELL US HOW PARTICIPATORY DESIGN GENERATED A SENSE OF OWNERSHIP AND INSPIRED A NATURAL COMMUNITY AT THE NTUC HEALTH SILVERCOVE SENIOR WELLNESS CENTRE.

Interview » Narelle Yabuka and Stephanie Peh
Photographs » COLOURS:Collectively Ours

The name COLOURS is more than a reference to diversity; it is also a combination of the words 'collectively' and 'ours' – an apt moniker for a design consultancy that specialises in bridging the gap between clients, stake holders and end users through participatory processes. Founded in 2013 by Dr Chong Keng Hua and Kang Fong Ing, COLOURS: Collectively Ours facilitates dialogue and seeks empowerment for the people who will use the spaces it designs. Its recent project, the NTUC Health SilverCOVE Senior Wellness Centre (located in Marsiling), illustrates how participatory design can enhance feelings of community and ownership among users, thus creating an intrinsically driven community.

What prompted you to establish COLOURS: Collectively Ours?
Since 2006, we have been involved in various community design projects under the NGO ReallyArchitecture (re:ACT). What began as a series of community projects and urban prototypes with university students later on made us realise the significance, as well as the gap, of involving the community much earlier in the design process. Nevertheless, the idea of starting a design consultancy came only after we returned from the United States, where we were exposed to similar emerging design practices, and we thought, "Hey, people in Asia need this too!"

What was NTUC Health seeking for the NTUC SilverCOVE Senior Wellness Centre in Marsiling?
NTUC Health was looking for innovative concepts to cater to residents of the new HDB studio apartments there. They envisioned the new centre as a wellness, commercial and social hub for the larger community in the vicinity.

Who proposed the participatory approach?
NTUC Health knew about our previous involvement in another Senior Activity Centre (SAC) makeover project, which also involved user participation in the design and prototyping process. When we proposed to have a participatory approach right from the beginning of the Marsiling project, there was no question about it.

How does SilverCOVE function differently from other SACs?
Most of the users of SilverCOVE come from a unique demographic group, many of whom chose to 'downsize' from larger apartments. A new type of centre was needed to offer these new senior residents assisted living, facilitate ageing-in-place and active living, and integrate them into the new community. So apart from social spaces, SilverCOVE offers quite a broad range of facilities including a senior-friendly gym and a dental clinic.

Tell us about the participatory workshop held by COLOURS: Collectively Ours.
It was conducted with the residents before we commenced the design. Staff of NTUC Health went door-to-door to invite the residents to take part. The workshop was held at the site itself, which allowed the residents to physically get a sense of what could or could not be done within the space. Through visual activities, site walk-about, group discussions and interviews, we gathered residents' inputs on programmes, and spatial and design preferences. They were very excited, actively contributing ideas and sharing concerns. Yet they were also aware that not every suggestion could be realised.

How did you collate and interpret the data?
Preferences, suggestions, concerns and desires were grouped into various categories to identify the different needs of the residents. For example, many residents wanted to have space for small group activities, such as cooking, gardening, exercising and doing handicraft together, while some suggested quiet corners for reading the newspaper, books or tablets.

How were the findings translated into design?
We paid attention to the residents' comments on their preferences for the overall feel of the environment. NTUC Health's programmatic requirements included two medical facilities (dental care and traditional Chinese medicine), a common concierge, gym equipment, staff office and other spaces. All data led to the development of the design concept – a changeable space with a feeling of openness to provide a variety of programmes and empower the residents to do what they want anytime.

Have you made observations of how the place is being used now?
We have conducted a post-occupancy evaluation. The results are based on 43 responses and show that almost all the residents like the openness of the environment, the variety of spaces and the facilities provided. Out of 11 respondents who had participated in the workshop earlier, nine of them feel that they contributed to the design, and seven offered to help out more in future. This is quite encouraging for us.

Are more clients adopting participatory design approaches? Do you detect a shift in perception about how projects are best delivered, and how people engage with design?
In other cities, participatory design happens under different circumstances – when the institution or the political-economic environment is not prepared enough to take on complex developmental issues and thus leaves them to the people to solve, or when people want to take the issues into their own hands. I don't think we are at either end, although we do see the trends of a more vocal citizenry (especially on social media) and a more open leadership style in dealing with urban issues faced by the country.

The recent growth of the participatory design movement is both global and local, powered by technology and accessibility of information. But I think participatory design will only truly flourish when people become more tolerant, respectful and responsible for their own words or actions. Only then we can have true conversations and go beyond what [the late American health policy expert] Sherry Arnstein called the 'tokenism' of participation.

In any case, we are not saying that every project has to include participatory design in order to be democratic. Not everyone wants to participate and there are many levels of participation depending on the objectives. As more technology becomes publicly available – like sensors, wearable devices, virtual reality, the Internet of Things, 3D printing, and so on – I foresee the way we communicate with each other and with the environment will be quite different. It will be much easier for people to engage in design, whether directly or indirectly, through many channels.

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"PARTICIPATORY DESIGN WILL ONLY TRULY FLOURISH WHEN PEOPLE BECOME MORE TOLERANT, RESPECTFUL AND RESPONSIBLE FOR THEIR OWN WORDS OR ACTIONS"

» Chong Keng Hua

Left: The designers focused on ambience, drawing in daylight and natural ventilation to create an open, bright and airy atmosphere and maximising views to the greenery outside

Top: The publicly accessible lobby contains light shades made of traditional bamboo food covers, and nostalgic rattan chairs and coffee tables

Bottom: The facade was transformed into a gardening wall where residents can grow their own herbs and other plants