Creative Ageing Cities: Place Design with Older People in Asian Cities: Foreward

The MIT Faculty has made this article openly available. Please share how this access benefits you. Your story matters.
Foreward: Silver Tsunami – Paradigm Shift – New Urban Creativity

Michael M.J. Fischer

Midwifing emergent, yet new, forms of life is challenging institutionally, financially, architecturally, psychologically, culturally and socially. But as this brilliant volume of detailed case studies illustrates, one can use ethnography in the meantime to experiment and innovate at the community level before, or especially while, trying to scale up to city-wide planning. “Ethnography in the meantime” is a set of tools for attention to those details that matter, and to processes of social decision-making and implementation, of how each of the above challenges can be iteratively modified. Emergent forms of life do not just unfold according to preformed patterns, but require work, both conceptual (in theory) and localized (in practice).

The aging of societies and the silver tsunami — the increasing speed of the aging of societies, the demographic shift towards a larger proportion of people over 70 or 75 worldwide,¹ especially in Asian cities and societies led by Japan, Singapore, Hong Kong, Taiwan, Korea, and China — has been on the United Nations and other policy-makers’ horizon for at least three decades.² How will societies support the projected health care costs as the percentage of workers to seniors declines? How can urban rent structures be changed so that the elderly are not pushed into the spatial and economic margins of cities? Above all, what kinds of fulfilling lives can we all look forward to as life expectancy lengthens? The Boomers (or baby boom generation born just after World War II) are now entering their seventies. They lead the cresting of this silver tsunami. They are also potentially a qualitatively different kind of generation of seniors than those who came before: healthier, more active, and less likely to be content to withdraw into playing supervised bingo, inactivity, or individualized religiosity. Perhaps, instead, the Boomers will help formulate creative new kinds of social living arrangements. Even in traditional terms this period of life, after householder duties are done, is often thought of as a period in which both men and women can become more socially creative than while
burdened with making a living and raising a family. Such social creativity must extend also to the issues of increasing numbers (but not necessarily percentages) of elders with various degrees and forms of dementia, disability, and needs; to slowing the onset of such problems, and to care for them in ways more distributed, less debilitating for their care-givers, and less upsetting (economically, psychologically) for everyone. The emergent, yet new, forms of social life will be made by harnessing a heterogeneity of individual talents, and age cohorts, into new living arrangements that are social, not merely individual, solutions to vibrant communities, what this volume calls *creative aging cities*.

This volume makes a series of interesting pragmatic suggestions regarding the five principles and eight areas that make for ageing-friendly cities identified by the United Nations (see fn 2). Since then a series of buzz-words have peppered both the planning and the community organizing literatures (Introduction), each new buzz-word shifting attention: from age-friendly to ageing friendly, from ageing in place to ageing in community, from active ageing to creative ageing, from needs based approaches to rights based approaches (rights to the city), from providing for seniors to providing with them in participatory planning that is *meaningful*, meaningful in place-making and meaningful in social empowerment to own, care for, and improve the environments in which one lives; and from design for elders to universal design, intergenerational forms of mutual helping, and sustainable and evolving social creativity.

One of the key paradigm shifts that this volume insists upon, especially given the above demographic shifts, is moving from the idea that cities can be best revitalized by a cycle of focus on a creative class of young high-tech ‘creatives’ (as in advertising creatives), often gay or LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer) singles or pairs without children. As gay individuals age, they can become marginalized, not unlike other ageing populations.³ Hence this volume explicitly counter poses the buzz-word “Creative Cities,” that has powered much recent urban planning, with Creative Ageing Cities.

Insistence on the agency of residents and the search for alternatives to knock down, displace, and rebuild approaches to urban renewal provide two further key
ethnography in the meantime inquiries in the present volume. Demolition and starting anew comes with a high price in social capital -- that hard to metricize collection of services that grow out of experience, familiarity, knowing the operable social networks (and how they extend beyond the immediate community), as well as the psychological terrain of the encrusted character and patina of local useages.

Using case studies in six different urban environments — Hong Kong, Seoul, Singapore, Shanghai, Taipei, and Tokyo – the present volume attempts to learn from on-going organic processes of neighbourhood renewal as not only residents, but also homes and built environments age. The case studies look for ways upgrading and incrementally improving the capacities for ageing friendly urban environments also improves the resilience and capacities of the social fabric more broadly, not just for elders (universal design). These cases provide experimental models of spaces that can be modified for application elsewhere for other kinds of circumstances. Lessons learned from Jangsu in Seoul (chapter 4), for instance, a steeply sloping neighbourhood, built up from an informal housing settlement over the decades, now home to a community of craftsmen, and providing a site of interest for tourists, at the base of an old fortress, may not be transferable whole scale to a neighbourhood of high rise buildings. And yet, there may be strategies that apply, say, across pedestrian bridges between buildings linking community-services (as with the elaborately linked pedestrian ways vertically and horizontally on the mountain slopes of Hong Kong) or extend the kind of open-to-the community elder care facilities described for Shanghai by Dong Yao (chapter 7).

Architects and urban planners have long talked of user-centric design and participant design, but these terms have often been token add-ons to processes that remain firmly in the control of the planners, architects, and engineers, rather than meaningfully in the hands of the residents who will live in the resulting “deliverables.” Meaningful here is social empowerment, taking ownership, and imprinting one’s environment with one’s own meanings.

Place-Making
One of the place-making images from the first chapter on Singapore that often returns to me in thinking about making places liveable, and that brings with it a wry smile, is that of the older men, “uncles” in Singapore’s familial patois, placing their plastic chairs along the path by the vehicle drop-off porch at a Senior Activity Centre. Chong Keng-Hua calls it the “car-porch guard post” scene. They smooze and kibbitz, chatter and exchange commentary, among themselves. But, Chong points out, they are also enacting their age-appropriate civic role as a neighbourhood watch group, creating a safe environment for returning school children and other members of their community. In older kampong or village days they would have done this at the atap-covered but open walled coffee shop. It is the kind of function that the urbanist Jane Jacobs made much of in her famous 1961 book, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*. It is a function that the women in Chong’s “gambling pit stop scene” and the men in the “chess playing” scene, and in a slightly different way, the “chess hideout scene” perform. All of these depend upon not just the public seeing-and-being-seen positioning, but also upon the ability to move furniture around, an insistence on informality, particularly against the official habitus of making everything orderly. No, the men will not play on the fixed concrete chess tables placed by the builders for their use, but will make their own informal ones ‘using simple low tables, stools, boxes and even cable spools’ in corners behind the mailboxes (cosy but still visible), or along the covered walkways. No, they will not move their now nine-year old chess games along the walkway to a “Resident’s Activity Room” where they won’t block the path. More than just the Jane Jacobs function of marking and protecting their communities, these informalities are an everyday politics of insisting on making living spaces and socialities one’s own, not the planners’ or social engineers.

In the high rise Housing Development Board flats of Singapore, Chong illustrates, people do this on the landings, on some of the wider corridor-balconies, and in community gardens along the sides of the housing estates, or even on the front yards of first floor apartments. These are all not quite technically legal, and sometimes have to be insisted upon against managers and police tasked with keeping things uncluttered and orderly.
As the volume concludes, drawing on examples from the case studies, a **place** — a quilt for remembering the deceased and for story-telling, a pavilion for resting and socializing, a corner garden, a care centre, a workshop, a walking path, and a neighbourhood — serves as a public realm where older people perform and are recognized as users, residents, and citizens rather than mere recipients of social welfare.

### Community Development Trajectories

Communities are not just building typologies but *learning organizations* composed of double helixes of continuity and innovations, experimenting and figuring out what works best for those who make up the community. The case studies here provide a number of different kinds of typologies of community development, and thus also different kinds of strategies for social empowerment and for care of the ageing residents and ageing built environments. In rapid urbanization processes in Asia, Africa, and Latin America informal communities called variously *gecondu* (Turkey), *favela* (Brazil), *hakobang* settlements (Korea), *bopiliao* or ‘skin peeling shacks and alleys’ (Taiwan), or more neutrally “informal settlements” often have begun as squatter settlements after war, disaster, or migration from impoverished hinterlands, and gradually were hardened from tents or sheeting to stone and brick, legalized, allowed political representation, eventually municipally serviced with water and electricity. Among the cases in this volume, Jengsu in Seoul, and parts of South Airport in Taipei began that way, as did overcrowded swaths of post-World War II Singapore. In other cases, modern post-World War II housing and post-disaster emergency housing was built for the displaced and have now become overcrowded and decayed (sections of South Airport, parts of Shanghai). In Singapore modernist public housing has gone through life cycle changes, with new taller high-rise buildings replacing older ones, and moving residents into the new buildings *before* demolishing the older ones (Chua 2017). New forms of urbanism are today being sought especially with the silver tsunami in mind. In Singapore, the Lien Foundation has solicited ideas for new elder-inclusive architectural arrangements beyond what currently exists; and both architectural firms and voluntary organizations have conducted experiments in
participatory design both of senior building common spaces, and external community spaces. In Seoul, the city government has experimented in physically rotating the mayor’s office through different communities to get input for participatory budgeting (Douglas 2016a, b, 2017). These are early stage efforts to insert local community creativity into larger urban governance.

The case of Jangsu, Seoul, is particularly interesting in being both bottom up and laterally inspired, that is by elders trying to improve things themselves, and by the Alternative Regeneration Research Team, and the social enterprise Dongne Moksu (or “village carpenter”) started by an ART civil activist who moved to Jiangsu, recruited other young staff to live in renovated houses as renters or occupant-owners. These new residents involved older residents with experience in construction, and all then began to stimulate suggestions from other residents, and eventually this activity was formally recognized by the government bringing further subsidies, municipal services, and community spaces including a cooperative dining room and cafe.

An important mediator of community level experiments to larger audiences can be through university departments of architecture and urban planning where professors and research students leave the premises of the university to help support and facilitate communities, social service agencies, and localities build innovative social infrastructures. The activities reported by Kang Ming Tay of her group and others at the National Taiwan University Graduate Institute of Building and Planning (chapter 3) is particularly impressive, both the effort which ultimately failed to prevent developers from targeting Bopiliao, but which nonetheless must have provided those involved with important community building skills; and the extraordinary successful organizing by the elected chief (li) of the South Airport Apartments to provide “meals on (moped) wheels”, create a community kitchen to produce those meals, set up a food bank that accepts community service labor as payment, transform an old building into a vibrant community center, organize elementary school children to play sports with elders, and set up a story-telling house for seniors to share and “retrieve their dignity.”

The sheer variety and inventiveness of activities designed to aid four different communities in Taipei — from making and screening short films in public places about
the neighborhood (to stave off developers destroying the Dong-yuan market in Ka-lak-á, putting up plaques about the history of buildings and turning those stories into a local opera group’s scripts, protecting an old tea house, transforming older buildings into several community centers — is not only impressive in itself, but a response to failures of traditional urban renewal strategies for the degraded, historic, Báng-kah area.

Kang elaborates two important techniques of “ethnography in the meantime”: paying attention to “place ballets” (patterned choreographies of use, by different groups of people, and their changing rhythms over the course of the day) and “memory tapestries” (stories affectively attached to places that give them depth of meaning, not just as history but as future-oriented inspirations for renewed creativity). As Kang notes, memory tapestries can be psychologically and therapeutically rich literal mural or quilt projects, but also more generally embodied understandings of place “in restructured social relations and creative cultural programmes of the local area.”

Similarly there are mediating efforts between community and municipality by faculty and students at Hong Kong’s Polytechnic, Hong Kong University’s Sao Po Centre of Aging, the Hong Kong Jockey Club’s sponsorship of four university gerontology units to launch age-friendly campaigns, and the Hong Kong Council of Social Service’s encouragement of the city’s eighteen district councils to organize local activities to meet the eight goals of the WHO’s Ageing Friendly Cities guidelines.

The point is not to provide for imagined elders, or even survey their desires, do focus groups with them, or do minor participant design (all of which can be helpful as initial, but only initial, tools), but to point to a generational sea change, the so-called silver tsunami that is about to break upon us, in which younger, energetic and adventurous seniors will take their living environments into their own hands in many different unforeseeable ways, along with the needs of their more disabled cohort members. It is perhaps to them that we might find ourselves looking in a few years for new ways of addressing some of the more intractable problems of living together in ever denser and high-rise cities. Younger planners and architects have roles to play in facilitating such inventiveness as do foundations and charities in helping to fund such experiments, as do public housing authorities.
One of the lessons learned from the very different Singapore and Seoul cases, is that people often desire the right to create their own spaces, making them meaningful in the context of their own lives, and that this desire cannot be satisfied by even the most well-meaning provision of standardized services and fixtures. There is, of course, a deeper motif legible to any Singaporean, as well as to residents of Hong Kong, Seoul, Taipei, Tokyo and elsewhere: the struggle for the right to politics in the small “p” sense of the word, in the sense of the right to everyday living in the way one wants as along as one doesn’t hurt others (or rights to the city). Although the “authorities” in the Singapore case (chapter1) — town council managers, Town Council committees, the Housing and Development Board, and so on — are gradually learning to be more flexible (as in the simple putting up of a plaque over an informal gathering place on a void deck, described by Chong, that confirms it as a Senior Residents Corner, or the agreement that the Clementi community garden could remain in place under a new contractual understanding) this remains, as Chong puts it, constantly contested spatial politics. Gradually the governance structures must learn to include different conflict management mechanisms, other than blind removal orders of resident innovations just because they have received a few complaints, which in turn causes public outcry and ridicule of the governance structures. Chong recounts some of the many instances of place-making that have been swept way because unnamed persons have complained, leading in turn to newspaper and other ridiculing of the governance.

The coming silver tsunami will probably herald changes in governance modalities, and may well become a creative source for redevelopment of spaces beyond the relatively limited ones of corridors, landings, front lawns, and side spaces. Interiors too need creative thinking of redesign with flexible walls and furniture, but also maybe cooperative forms of ownership that can redevelop large areas much as shop house redevelopment has been allowed to break through walls forging new architectural typologies, including perhaps more mixed use topologies, with services at various levels, not only on the ground floor, and perhaps flyovers or
bridges, and monorail connections, across buildings as is tentatively (or only notionally) developed in the high rent (but HDB) Pinnacles towers or such condominium worlds as The Lace and Moshe Safi’s gigantic Sky Habitat in Bishun (Singapore).

This all requires new business models (from household level to corporate ones) to achieve, but surely the expertise of the silver tsunami can be put to use there as well.

Replacing Religion

It is always an oddity for outsiders to notice that although much of Singapore’s sociality, voluntary welfare systems, and sense of altruism is rooted in religious organizations, such organizations never play a role in discussions of public policies such as those surrounding the silver tsunami, ostensibly because Singapore is resolutely (and rightly should remain) a secular form of governance, which does not mean that its populace is not religious. The discussion of health care by Wong Sweet Fun’s is the only chapter in this volume to acknowledge this role of religious organizations, and their own transformation from “an authoritarian influence that helped to manage disputes, taught values, and took care of aged and destitute,” into more social-work voluntary organizations.

Singapore promotes religious freedom (as a private and community set of rights), regulates religious organizations, and depends upon them where government services are inadequate. The longitudinal research on the efficacy of various sorts of intervention to delay the onset of dementia, depression, isolation and suicide among the elderly, done by Prof Kua E.E. Hoek (2017), for instance, is supported with funding and some volunteer personnel by both the Presbyterians and the most important Chinese Temple in Singapore. There is a quiet fear that more open acknowledgement of the role of religious organizations in preserving the social fabric could become conflictual rather than strengthening of a common future of tolerance and solidarity (as happened when, briefly, religious education was introduced in schools and then quickly removed [Chua 2017]). It is a parallel, or even part, of the struggle between allowing urban communities to self-organize and
be regulated. Older folks notoriously are not necessarily more tolerant, but they do have experiential skills in getting along where there is pressure to do so, and Singapore's housing policies and ministries for religious oversight have tried to foster living together of different ethnic and religious communities (or “racial” ones, as the local increasingly antiquated plural society idiom has it for a society of many immigrant groups not merely the four bureaucratically recognized: Chinese, Indian, Malay, and Other).

Wellness Kampongs, TACEL

Sweet Fun WONG presents a fascinating preliminary account of nurturing wellness kampongs in Singapore, that is, nurturing buddy relationships and care for chronic disease in the home and local community. This both takes the burden off hospital emergency rooms, and more importantly builds resilient social fabrics especially for senior citizens, otherwise in danger of being left isolated amidst rapid social change. St Lukes is an important component of the collaboration, along with the Alexandra Hospital Network, in fostering this community-based strengthening of health care. There is also a renewed push by the Singapore government to mandate private health care providers join the national medical records system. Digital technologies increasingly will help mediate health and community, and are technologies that the ageing generations will increasingly be comfortable with. The name “Wellness Kampong” is a nice gesture to the idea of community nostalgically remembered as communities of solidarity and mutual self help.

“Wellness Kampong” is one of a series of terms and concepts deployed to foster community-making efforts. Two others in the current volume's case studies are TACEL (Tseung Kwan O Assoc of Concern for Elderly) in Hong Kong (chapter 7), and the Community Care Temporary Housing concept in Japan for post-earthquake emergency housing that focuses on the needs of elders (chapter 8). More generally, there is the now East-Asia-wide planning rubric called in Japan “Machizukuri” or Maeul-Mandeulgi in Korea, and SheQu-YingZao in Taiwan, for citizen or resident led movements to improve their communities, said to have begun in post-earthquake and later post-Korean war contexts. After the 1923 Great Kanto Earthquake that
devasted much of central Tokyo, university campuses moved to what would become the town of Kunitachi, and when bars and clubs began to open to a clientele of American G.I.s during the Korean War, the community organized to claim an Education District designation which would limit use of buildings for adult entertainment. Similar such community movements were picked up elsewhere and the term became more generic. More specifically keyed to elders is the Ibasho Cafe, founded by Dr. Emi Kyota, incorporated as a nonprofit in 2010 in Washington D.C., and developed in Ofunato (Iwate prefecture) devastated by the 2011 Great East Japan Earthquake and tsunami. Ibasho Cafe is a center where elders can come together to do projects, hang-out, develop their sense of belonging and purpose, and contribute their skills and knowledge to society.

Paradigm Shifts, Silver Tsunami, Creative Ageing Cities

While there are a number of sources of current paradigm shifts towards what this volume calls Creative Ageing Cities — failures in previous strategies (high rise buildings in Seoul’s Jangsu, axis realignment in Taipei’s Wanhua Báng-kah district, suburban large nursing homes in Shanghai); practicums in graduate architecture and urban planning departments (Taipei, Hong Kong); new initiatives by municipalities (Hong Kong), and research initiatives by Foundations and Housing Development Boards (Singapore Lien Foundation, and the HDB putting out tenders to architecture and design firms to experiment with retrofitting building spaces through senior citizen involvement in participatory design); and United Nations led policy agendas and guidelines — the underlying social pressure is coming from a demographic shift often called the silver tsunami which is forcing new thinking about health care, housing, social resilience, and community vitality.

This elegantly produced case book makes a major contribution by getting us to think in detail, on the ground, about how on-going organic innovations can generate new urban models for the coming decades, and for social arrangements we want to live in, whether in high rise densities (Singapore), conserved neighborhoods resistant to profit-driven development (Taipei; see also Liu 2016), self-help civic engagement supported by government (Seoul), community care-oriented temporary housing post-disaster (Tono
and Kamaishi Cities, Iwate Prefecture, Japan), participatory design and social empowerment workshops cognizant of social and political contexts (Hong Kong), or micro-scaled community based integrated senior facilities in converted shops, sports facilities, and other building types (Shanghai). Along the way are fascinating ethnographic and historical observations that localize and enliven, but do not determine, our understandings of how place-making is shaped, such as the contrast between Malay kampong (stilt houses with veranda for men and kitchen area for women, but laid out with respect to one another with varying degrees of public intervening spaces) and Chinese houses (next to each other along linear paths, demarcated with fences), or open coffee houses and markets as visual foci making the community legible to itself; or the suggestion that the role of religion shifts from authoritarian influence to social work and social infrastructure beyond denominational or temple congregation; provision of tools and workshop spaces for seniors who know how to work with their hands and can contribute to retrofitting, repairing, and building community facilities (Hong Kong, Taipei, Singapore); attention to spaces that attract “regulars” (Taipei, Singapore, Jangsu) and to elders who continue to run shops or build stairways (Hong Kong, Taipei). New emergent forms of social life do not mechanically unfold by themselves but can be midwifed by ethnography in the meantime, attending to process as capacity building (not just to finished facilities for users to adapt themselves to), and attending to the choreographies of place ballets and memory tapestries of heterogeneous histories.

Read this book: it will change how you see the cities around you, and their potentials for new emergent forms of life involving multiple generations and interdependencies on scales both large and small.

References
Chua Beng-Hua

Douglas, Mike.


2017 “From Corporate Globopolis to Progressive Cities in Asia – Alternative Futures for Planetary Urbanization with Reference to Seoul.” (Manuscript, 2017.)

Fischer, Michael M.J.


Fruneaux, Christiaan and Edwin Gardner.


Kiyota, Emi, Yasuhiro Tanaka, Margaret Arnold, and Daniel Aldrich.


Kua EE Heok.


Lim, Jason and Terence Lee, ed.s.

Liu, John K.C.


Watanabe, Shun-ichi J.

http://www.fau.usp.br/iphis/abstractsAndPapersFiles/Sessions/36/WATANABe.pdf

1 As both retirement age and the age of the boomers creeps up into the 70, it seems that to use the old 60 or 65 years as a definition of elders or the aging society is out of date.

2 Ageing-friendly cities were put on the United Nations agenda in 1991 with five principles: independence, participation, care, self-fulfillment, dignity (Resolution A/RES/46/91). In 2002 the Madrid International Plan of Action on Ageing (MIPAA) established guidelines for the “building of a society for all ages,” followed in 2007 by the World Health Organization (WHO) Global Age-friendly Cities Guide that identified eight areas of urban life that constitute an ageing-friendly city: outdoor spaces and buildings; transportation; housing; social participation; respect and social inclusion; civic participation and employment; communication and information; and community support and health services. In 2010 the WHO Global Network for Age-friendly Cities and Communities (GNAFCC) was established to facilitate exchange of information, resources, and best practices. In June 2017 Paris became the 500th city to join the network with its ageing-friendly initiatives.

https://www.nytimes.com/2017/07/03/nyregion/housing-lgbt-seniors-new-york-city.html?_r=0

4 For a complementary account, see John K.C. Liu’s September 29, 2016 lecture at the Centre for Liveable Cities in Singapore. Liu provides a history of participatory
planning in Taiwan after the lifting of martial law in 1987 and the florescence of civil society associations, and particularly the history of his own Building anbd Planning Research Foundation, that he set up upon his return from the U.S. at the National University of Taiwan, acknowledging as well two other important non-governmental organizations focused on housing issues, OURS and Tsui Mama. The Foundation has been involved in some five hundred projects, and the case study he presents is of Treasure Hill in the heart of Taipei, a site somewhat like Jangsu in Seoul that became reconstructed one third for the original now aging residents, one third as an artists village, and one third as hostels for young people. He touches on some of the problems encountered both in creating a workable mix of groups, and especially the work of dealing with multiple government agencies (fire codes, seismic codes, etc.) and training community organizers. One of the success stories that Mihye Cho, one of the editors of this volume has also reported on elsewhere is of an vacant and overgrown building that the community turned into center with shared tools for repairing things or helping with construction, food preparation and distribution, and socializing.

5 Each urban environment will have a different mix of such facilitators and municipal regulations that may need updating. In Singapore, for example, see Chua 2017 for an extended discussion of the financing of the housing markets. The Lien Foundation has commissioned one of the editors of this volume to produce a volume on ideas for “out of the box” ageing friendly and aging in community design for Singapore, to help the Housing Development Board and private developers generate new ideas.

6 See in particular the chapters 6-10 on church, Hinduism, a Chinese’s temple’s history, Buddhism, Islam in Lim and Lee, ed., 2016.

7 http://www.fau.usp.br/iph3/abstractsAndPapersFiles/Sessions/36/WATANABe.pdf