

## **New ideas for ageing S'pore**

### **Architect aims to help older folk remain in the community rather than relocate**

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VETERAN architect Tay Kheng Soon wants to spark a conversation about new ways to live, work and play in land-scarce and fast-ageing Singapore.

So he has uploaded a video on YouTube with a host of ideas, from building cheap retirement cottages in Housing Board carparks, to splitting five-room HDB flats into self-contained studios for retirees and starting neighbourhood "care clubs" where active older folk will provide nursing care for the frail.

An adjunct professor at the National University of Singapore (NUS), his main aim is to find ways to help Singaporeans age in familiar surroundings. His video is the second on new ways to learn, work, age and even farm in the community. The first, on transforming Singapore into an intelligent city, was uploaded last December.

The former head of the Singapore Institute of Architects, Mr Tay, 74, told The Sunday Times that his aim is to let older people remain in their community rather than sell their home and relocate to a smaller flat elsewhere.

There are nearly 405,000 people here aged 65 and above, up from around 250,000 a decade ago. The number is projected to grow to 900,000 by 2030.

Mr Tay proposes building one-bedroom 320 sq ft retiree cottages above existing open-air carparks. Several thousand such cottages - costing as little as \$50,000 - can be built across Singapore, he said. The rooftops will have gardens, so high-rise residents living nearby do not see just slabs of concrete. "You can even plant vegetables on the rooftops," he said.

His ideas centre on HDB estates because "planning for ageing must start with the majority and this is in the HDB estates".

Another idea - the brainchild of Mr Tay's former student Jonathan Toh, 26 - offers older folk the option of splitting a five-room HDB flat into three studio apartments, each with its own toilet and kitchen. The original flat owner can keep one studio, and sell or rent out the other two.

"Downgrading, relocating or even demolishing entire blocks are rather radical solutions to the changing housing needs of Singaporeans," said Mr Toh, who graduated with a Master's degree in architecture from NUS this year.

"I just wondered whether existing HDB flats could be reconfigured to adapt to changing needs as people age, while at the same time earning them additional income."

The cost of retrofitting the flats could be borne by the Government or covered by part of the sale proceeds.

The 24-minute video also discusses alternatives to putting up ageing private estates for collective sales. Mr Tay said: "People have lived in these older estates for a long time, formed friendships, and a viable community is already in existence. If it goes en bloc, all the place value and community value will be expunged."

The ideas have already struck a chord among some older folk like Ms Gurmail Kaur, 55, who lives alone in a three-room HDB flat.

"I really like the idea of a \$50,000 cottage," said the part-time teacher, who has viewed the video. "But I must be convinced that these additional structures will not add to the congestion in an already built-up environment."

The video has also generated some discussion online since it appeared on Sept 17. Among the first to congratulate Mr Tay was Institute of Policy Studies senior research adviser Arun Mahizhnan.

"Kheng Soon has long been an original thinker," Mr Arun told The Sunday Times. "In his latest vision for ageing in place, he once again demonstrates his uncanny ability to create something that suits our temperament as well as our environment, matching function and form."

Most urban planners ape the West without due regard to indigenous factors, noted Mr Arun, who is interested in ways to create a built environment that is reflective of Singapore's own geography and culture. "Kheng Soon is the antithesis to such an approach," he said.