

Seniors live large in small space

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The Straits Times, 25 March 2012

Small but self-contained studio flats for the elderly need not be grim, as their dwellers will testify

Her entire home is the size of some people's living rooms but as far as Madam Lim Ker Lian is concerned, everything she needs is either within her four walls or at her doorstep.

The 77-year-old widow lives alone in an airy 45 sq m elderly friendly studio apartment built by the Housing Board. It packs in a living room, kitchen, bathroom and bedroom, all fitted with non-slip tiles, grab bars and a bell pull she can yank during emergencies.

At the foot of her block in Ang Mo Kio Avenue 1 is a seniors service centre, where the staff are trained to respond to emergencies. The centre also functions as a social hub for elderly residents such as her, who can use the computers or read newspapers there free of charge.

Indeed, her one-year-old block of flats - painted in breezy Lego-like shades of indigo, mustard and white - could not be further away from the grim spectre of the 'death houses' conjured up by Toh Yi residents who recently opposed the HDB building a block of studios in their estate.

This was what LifeStyle found on a visit to studio apartment precincts in Tampines - where some of the first such flats were built in 2001 - and Ang Mo Kio, Bishan, Queenstown and Jurong West.

There are about 2,000 studio flats all over Singapore, in standalone blocks or integrated with larger flat types, sold by the HDB on a 30-year lease to Singaporeans aged 55 and above.

There will be more to come. Another 4,800 studio units in various estates will be completed over the next three years. This year, the HDB intends to launch 2,000 studios.

Madam Lim's verdict on her small but self-contained studio home of one year? 'There is ample space for one person living alone and the company at the seniors centre is quite pleasant. I'm quite happy here,' she says.

The second floor of her Ang Mo Kio block is connected to the rooftop garden of the neighbourhood's multi-storey carpark. This garden has a seniors fitness corner and is a cinch for the elderly to get to, thanks to level flooring, lifts on every floor and

sheltered walkways.

But she is not surrounded by just people her age. Her immediate neighbours include younger couples with families, as her block has a mix of studios and three- and four-room flats.

Elderly studio owners that LifeStyle spoke to find them affordable and mostly well-designed. The HDB's studio apartment scheme, launched in 1998, could well be the future of housing for ageing lower- to middle-income Singaporeans, say some eldercare experts, what with home sizes shrinking and more able-bodied singles or couples preferring to live on their own in their old age.

One example is retired oil rig worker Goh Liang Huat and his wife, both in their 70s. A year ago, the Gohs sold their three-room Telok Blangah HDB flat for more than \$300,000 and moved into a \$70,000 studio apartment at Jurong West.

'Our two grown-up children had moved out and the old flat became too big for us. We wanted to downgrade so we could build up our savings,' explains Mr Goh.

Studio flats come in two sizes - 35 sq m and 45 sq m. The HDB prices them according to factors such as prevailing market conditions, location and the 30-year lease, which is shorter than the 99-year lease of other flat types.

So while the Gohs' 45 sq m studio cost \$70,000, or \$1,556 per sq m, a resale three-room HDB flat measuring about 64 sq m to 74 sq m in the same Jurong West area was sold at between \$291,000 and \$357,000 over the past year, according to the HDB InfoWeb. This works out to about \$4,343 to \$4,906 per sq m, making studio flats a lot more affordable.

Studio apartments cannot be rented out or sold on the open market. If the owner wants to move out before the 30-year lease is up, the HDB will take back the property and refund the unused portion of the lease.

This condition is a matter of some debate. On the one hand, this 'prevents speculation and ensures that these apartments remain affordable to elderly Singaporeans', says Dr Kang Soon Hock, a sociologist specialising in ageing issues at the Institute of Policy Studies.

However, the fact that 'the elderly cannot leave this flat as an inheritance for their children or sell it if they need cash' is a 'disadvantage', says Ms Peh Kim Choo. The assistant director of counselling, social work practice and care management at the Hua Mei Centre For Successful Ageing thinks this makes studios a less attractive housing option for elderly Singaporeans.

Although the HDB cites a 90 per cent take-up rate for studio apartments launched in the past two years, a visit to newer blocks in Queenstown and Jurong West -

completed about a year ago - found many uninhabited studio units which had accumulated flyers and dust outside.

This, as well as a dearth of elder-friendly activities in estates that do not have a seniors service centre, bother some residents. 'I don't like how quiet this estate is,' says Madam Yam S. M., in her 70s, who otherwise likes the 'comfortable size' of her studio home in Queenstown's Strathmore Avenue, where she lives alone.

She misses her friends in her old neighbourhood, Bukit Panjang, where she used to live in a three-room flat. Two Strathmore Avenue blocks have studios as well as larger flats, with many of both types unoccupied. A seniors service centre nearby is still under construction.

Experts who study ageing issues say it is critical, when designing homes for the elderly, to not just build physical structures but also to create social and health-care support systems for seniors. Health-care facilities would allow the elderly to continue living on their own even when physical frailty or disability sets in. While the older studio flats typically have social clubs nearby - run by voluntary welfare organisations - these clubs do not offer medical services.

Creating a more comprehensive support system is something HDB is starting to do with two seniors service centres, run by private operators in studio apartment precincts in Bishan and Ang Mo Kio. Another two centres will open this year at Queenstown and Jurong West.

At the same time, to ensure that these neighbourhoods do not become elderly enclaves, HDB should stop building standalone studio blocks and make sure every floor has a mix of studios and larger flats, says Dr Kanwaljit Soin. She is president of Wings, an education centre which prepares women over 40 for old age.

'I think it would depress you, as an old person, to see only other old people. Society consists of all ages and the place where we live should reflect that,' she adds.

Issues of the sale and design of studios aside, experts urge the Government to consider developing a spread of elder housing options for different income groups. This is because HDB studios cater only to seniors who own larger flats and want to downgrade to a smaller place.

Nonetheless, the HDB studio apartment scheme is effective and it is crucial to educate the public of the need for purpose-built housing for the elderly, says Dr Kang.

This would address resistance to such flats from a disgruntled minority such as the Toh Yi residents. HDB decided to go ahead with the plan to build the senior's studio flats earlier this month.

Dr Kang suggests roadshows in all HDB estates detailing a menu of housing options

for the elderly. Community leaders could also go door to door explaining such developments, he adds, 'because communication in this instance is important to promote acceptance and buy-in by residents'.

Flat takes just 7 minutes to clean

MR ROOP DADLANI, 80, AND MADAM SAVITA ROOP, 70

Buying a new house usually involves multiple visits to a showroom, but the Roop family bought theirs without even knowing what a studio apartment was.

That was four years ago. Mr Roop Dadlani had retired from his salesman job in a family import-export business in 2001 and the couple were dealt a financial blow when Madam Savita was involved in a car accident. The couple have no children.

'It was a difficult time for us,' recounts Madam Savita, a housewife. 'Money was tight and I had just had an accident, so we were paying off my medical expenses.'

When their four-room Ang Mo Kio Avenue 4 flat was sold in an en bloc exercise in the HDB Selective En-bloc Redevelopment programme, the couple were at a loss.

But a conversation with Member of Parliament Inderjit Singh, who represents the Ang Mo Kio ward where Madam Savita and her 80-year-old husband used to live, changed everything.

'MP Inderjit coaxed us,' says Madam Savita. 'He said, 'Roop and Savita, you deserve a more manageable place to live since you have no children to live with. Let me help you book a studio flat'. So we just booked without knowing what we were booking.'

Her voice thickens with emotion as she adds: 'When we got the keys last January and I saw the view for the first time, I nearly broke down.'

A proud Mr Roop says of the airy high-floor apartment in Ang Mo Kio Avenue 1 which has a bedroom, a kitchen and a living room: 'You can see all of Ang Mo Kio from here.'

Their new home comes equipped with grab rails in the shower and by the front door, non-slip tiles throughout the flat, and an emergency pull cord.

'Thank God, we have never needed to use it so far,' Madam Savita says. 'But we feel so much better knowing it is there.'

The 45 sq m studio flat is just over a kilometre from their old apartment block, so the couple did not have to spend time getting used to a new living environment.

They received \$255,000 from the sale of their flat and the new flat cost \$64,000, leaving them with enough money to live on.

The compact size of their new home makes it easy to clean, says Madam Savita, and the kitchen cabinets are on castors.

'You can reach the corners better. Now, I can clean the whole place in seven minutes.'

Moving into a studio meant they had to clear out bulky furniture and they gave many of their possessions to charity. Mr Roop bought a laptop to replace a desktop computer as it takes up less space.

Much of their furniture was tailor made to fit the space, as off-the-shelf items from stores such as Courts were too big. They also converted the bomb shelter into a walk-in closet for Madam Savita, to supplement the bedroom's built-in wardrobe.

Otherwise, life in the elder-friendly Teck Ghee Vista estate continues much the same as before for the couple, who have been married for 49 years.

Mr Roop wakes up at 5am every day and begins his morning with an hour of exercise at the fitness corner downstairs, which is designed for seniors and has exercise equipment for wheelchair-bound residents.

After performing prayers and having some tea, he walks 2km to Ang Mo Kio MRT station to buy newspapers.

Madam Savita has been a volunteer at the Asian Women's Welfare Association Senior Activity Centre in Ang Mo Kio Avenue 6 for three decades.

She cooks for the lower-income senior citizens who reside in the area. The couple also collect old clothes from friends and relatives to take to a village in Batam. They visit the village on the last Sunday of every month with fellow members from their religious group, the Sri Sathya Sai Baba society.

If there is any drawback in living in their current location, Madam Savita feels it is the lack of coffee shops in the neighbourhood.

Sometimes, she takes the bus to Serangoon Road to buy cooked vegetarian food. She buys her groceries from the NTUC supermarket in Ang Mo Kio Hub, just two stops away by bus service number 130.

She also finds the community spirit lacking, as her younger neighbours are often out working. 'The residents' committees must do more to organise parties or gettogethers,' she says.

She suggests that the seniors service centre allow residents to have potlucks or bake sales to mingle and enjoy food together.

Annabeth Leow

Seniors centre keeps her busy

MS JOSEPHINE ANG, 67

Retired teacher Josephine Ang has been living in one of Singapore's earliest standalone blocks of elderly-friendly studio apartments for more than 10 years.

'Almost 12 years, lah,' says the affable resident of Golden Pines estate in Tampines Street 81, 'but I still cannot believe it has been so long.'

She moved into the 45 sq m studio apartment in June 2001, which cost \$61,000, after selling her three-room HDB flat in Serangoon North for \$135,000.

She says that she decided to move to the studio flat because it is only half an hour by bus to the Bedok Lutheran Church she attends. She also wanted to be able to volunteer with senior citizens less active than her.

The mature estate is packed with coffee shops, provision stores, clinics, hairdressing salons and other amenities. Supermarkets are only a five-minute walk away and there are a variety of cheap eateries for when she does not want to cook.

The singleton leads an active social life. She is a regular at the eldercare centre, Evergreen Circle, located on the second floor of her block.

'Now that you mention it,' she says with a laugh, 'I've been there every day this week.'

Going by her cheerful greetings to residents, she knows almost everybody by name at the eldercare centre.

At the centre, Ms Ang reads the free newspapers and chats with friends such as 72-year-old Madam Jessie Leong and attends enrichment talks on active senior living topics such as healthy lifestyle habits and power-of-attorney rights.

She also runs basic English classes for her non-English-speaking neighbours, has taught handicraft workshops and is on the planning committee for Evergreen Circle's anniversary celebrations.

'We're very busy people even in our old age,' her friend Madam Leong jokes. 'Josephine and I have Saturday lunch dates, and we go to talks and exhibitions.'

'We also visit the Singapore Expo nearby,' Ms Ang chimes in. 'In fact, yesterday, we went to the 50plus Expo together,' she says, referring to the annual active ageing gala hosted by the Council for Third Age.

Her parents are deceased and one of her seven siblings - an elder sister who is a 70-year-old divorcee - lives alone on the floor below in the same block. Ms Ang says she does not see her sister much because they lead separate lives.

Ms Ang did not have many belongings so moving all of them from a 75 sq m flat to a 45 sq m studio did not faze her.

Photographs of old Singapore, shot by her father, take pride of place on her front door and her refrigerator and bomb shelter doors.

Her living room is filled with an eclectic mix of furnishings, from a solid wood TV bench to a cushioned daybed. These, in combination with her lace curtains and chintzy pink bedspread, make the flat feel like a country-style cocoon.

In addition, the handicraft enthusiast made many of the decorations in her flat. Even her emergency pull cord, to summon help in the event of an accident, has been jazzed up with artificial flowers wound gaily around the cord.

One decade after Golden Pines opened, does Ms Ang feel like she is missing out on the swanky new estates which also feature studio apartments?

'I saw the new layouts at an HDB exhibition and they are very nice. Especially the mixed blocks,' she says, referring to developments in Bishan and Ang Mo Kio that have a mix of studio apartments and larger flats in the same block.

'Here, where everyone is old, sometimes nobody can help you. If your lightbulb blows and you can't fix it, it's so much harder for another old person to change it,' her friend Madam Leong adds.

'All the same,' Ms Ang continues, 'I like mixing with the different people here. You really get to know everyone because you live in the same block and meet at the eldercare centre. I have made a lot of friends and my schedule is always busy.'

Annabeth Leow

RAISE THE ALARM FOR HELP

When an alarm went off, medical assistant Ng Pickpoh, 59, sprang into action. With her supervisor, traditional Chinese medicine practitioner He Yuying, 44, Madam Ng hastened to the studio apartment where the distress signal was sounded.

They found a resident who had missed his dose of diabetes medication and had

difficulty breathing. After assessing the situation, Madam Ng and Madam He called an ambulance and the resident received medical treatment in time.

For the elderly residents of the Golden Jasmine studio apartments at Block 152B, Bishan Street 11, living alone or with an aged spouse need not evoke fears of medical emergencies because of staff such as Madam Ng who work at the spacious void deck seniors service centre.

Although public studio flats have been around since 2001, seniors service centres - which offer residents professional physiotherapy and other community medical services - were introduced only last January under a pilot scheme by the HDB and the Ministry of Community Development, Youth and Sports.

Under this scheme, void deck sites are put up for tender to be developed as seniors service centres for studio-dwellers and other elderly residents in the neighbourhood.

The service centre serving the Golden Jasmine studio apartments was the first to be built. It is run by Econ Health and Wellness Centre, which is managed by the China Healthcare group known for running the private West Point Hospital.

What facilities do such senior centres offer? For one, all HDB studio apartments have an emergency pull cord in every room, and the service centres monitor these alarms from 9am to 6pm on weekdays and 9am to 1pm on Saturdays. This service is free for all studio apartment owners in line with government regulations.

When the service centres are closed, residents will watch out for one another, aided by digital panels at every lift lobby that flash the unit number of the one where help is needed.

Besides this service, Econ Health and Wellness Centre also offers a TCM clinic, physiotherapy services and use of an exercise corner for a fee, as well as free access to its reading corner, Internet-enabled computer, TV set, board and card games and social lounge.

Similar facilities are available at the only other operational seniors service centre, Orange Valley Nursing Homes' One Care Zone at Block 307D in Ang Mo Kio Avenue 1, which opened last month.

Two more centres, in Queenstown and Jurong West, have been planned for this year but are still under construction. The Queenstown centre will be operated by China Healthcare and the Jurong West one by the Thye Hua Kwan Moral Society's welfare arm.

Seniors service centres were preceded by neighbourhood links in older studio apartment blocks such as Presbyterian Community Services' Evergreen Circle at the studio apartment block Golden Pines in Tampines Street 11.

Typically run by voluntary welfare organisations, these neighbourhood links focus on providing recreational services such as karaoke nights and language classes at little or no cost.

However, the key difference between neighbourhood links and seniors service centres lies in the former's emphasis on social activities, with medical services such as physiotherapy not available on the menu.

While Golden Pines residents have responded positively to Evergreen Circle, change is in the air for neighbourhood links. If all goes well, the ministry has indicated that existing neighbourhood links could be converted to seniors service centres in the future.

As a China Healthcare spokesman explained: 'Our focus on health and wellness differentiates us from older eldercare centres. We have expertise from running our nursing homes and we offer TCM and physiotherapy to fill the need for a one-stop place where you can receive medical care for conditions less acute than what needs to be treated at a polyclinic.'

These additional medical services do not come cheap, however. The usual price for the use of the gym for one month at Econ Health and Wellness is \$88.30 for Golden Jasmine residents and \$117.70 for residents of other blocks.

One Care Zone charges \$100 for each physiotherapy session, with a 10 per cent discount for members, who do not need to pay a membership fee.

A spokesman for One Care Zone said it has received feedback on the prices and plans to seek the ministry's support in subsidising its rehabilitative care programmes.

China Healthcare's spokesman, however, emphasised that a balance must be struck between affordability for residents and the centre's bottom line.

Despite promotional offers, these high prices have deterred some residents, who either make use only of the free social facilities or else simply avoid the centres for now.

If Golden Jasmine's Econ Health and Wellness Centre is anything to go by, though, membership may soon pick up at the newer centres. Its dinner gatherings, held every few months, originally began as catered parties, but turned into potlucks as the community grew and residents began bringing their own food.

Annabeth Leow

Mr Goh Liang Huat and his wife downgraded from a three-room flat to a studio because their grown-up children had moved out and their former house became too

big for them.