

Coffee Corner at Block 122

Café for Older Adults in Toa Payoh West Singapore

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Built environment is of the utmost importance for the comfort and safety of older adults, but, so is their social connectedness within the communities that they live in. In this web note, we will consider the trend of ‘Senior Cafés’ or cafés for older adults, which are emerging in Singapore. Like many other similar cafés around the world, these coffee places serve as an important meeting space for older adults and others in the residential neighbourhood. Frequently, these cafés do not just function as coffee places since they also organise other activities and talks for older adults. Some are run by older adults for older adults, some are dementia-friendly, and others are multigenerational. But, they all play a vital role in neighbourhoods and older adults’ lives.

Cafés for older adults can be found internationally,¹ which testifies to their significance and popularity. In recent years, Singapore’s cafés for older adults have been growing in number. What can we learn about Singapore’s ‘senior cafés’? To answer this question, we will study Coffee Corner at Block 122 Lorong 2 Toa Payoh, and review some other emerging examples.

¹ For a more detailed overview of cafés for older adults in other countries, see Jasmine (2015).

Coffee Corner at Block 122, Toa Payoh West²

Every Saturday morning from 8:30am to 10:30am, a bustling activity takes place under Block 122, Lorong 2 Toa Payoh. During this time, it is commonplace to see older adults chatting away while taking their seats to enjoy coffee and breakfast. They are attending a weekly event organised by the Toa Payoh View Residents' Committee (RC), where older adults are invited to have coffee and bread with their friends and neighbours.

The aim of Coffee Corner is to encourage the residents to get to know and interact with one another. The idea came about in September 2016, as Mr. Philip Phajan Singh mentioned, when the grassroots leaders of Toa Payoh View RC formed a partnership with one of the bakery shops in the neighbourhood, Bread Line at Block 111 Lorong 1 Toa Payoh, to provide unsold bread to their Coffee Corner.

The RC tried to organise a few similar events in the past but these never really took off. Anecdotally, Coffee Corner was born out of a slight slip-up. Mr. Philip Phajan Singh was supposed to announce it, but instead of declaring that Coffee Corner will occur on a *monthly* basis, he stated that it will happen once a *week*. Yet, this small mistake led to a beautiful thing. At the first Coffee Corner, there were about 80 people. The number kept growing each week and soon increased to 120, even 140, to the point that there are now 180 to 200 attendees, mostly older residents, each week.

Even though Coffee Corner is organised by the RC members, a lot of residents have come forward to help with its preparation. For instance, one of the residents would help with registration, others

would help with serving attendees, carrying chairs and setting up tables. Sometimes even children would volunteer and help serve bread. Some residents come every Saturday at 7:45am to help set up Coffee Corner. To accommodate around 200 people would take about 30 minutes of preparation. This way, everybody plays a role and share the workload. Only 3 to 4 RC members need to come help and run a group of 200 people because the residents themselves help a lot.

What is remarkable about Coffee Corner is that it is able to sustain people's interest. Residents look forward to coming and meeting their friends every Saturday. Talks and events, e.g. about health and fitness are organised to further spark people's interest. The Coffee Corner has become 'something to look forward to' in the words of grassroots leaders, Mr. Philip Phajan Singh and Mdm. Helen Phua. People look forward to a near-home convenient social space where they mingle among neighbours, make new friends, feel motivated to get involved, and Coffee Corner offers that. So far, it has never been cancelled since its inception in 2016.

More than Coffee and Bread

Every Saturday, residents are offered either coffee, Milo, or tea, and bread. At the moment, the bread that they receive is sponsored, which means that they cannot make a change to this part of the meal, but they are already serving healthier drinks: their tea and coffee are served *kosong*-style.³ The move to offer healthier choices is part of the Coffee Corner's aim on public education and awareness raising. In other words, Coffee Corner is not only about promoting fellowship but also healthy lifestyle and health education.

² We thank Mdm. Judy Foo, Senior Manager of Grassroots Development and Planning Division at Toa Payoh West Community Club; Mr. Philip Phajan Singh, Project Chairman at Toa Payoh View Residents' Committee; and Madam Helen Phua, Vice-Chairman

of the Toa Payoh View Residents' Committee for their valuable insights and information on the Coffee Corner at Block 122. We also thank the RC Chairman Mr. Clarence Poon for his strong support.

³ Without sugar.

Therefore, Coffee Corner does not just fulfil one function. In addition to offering coffee and bread to older adults, they organise talks and act as a platform for conveying relevant and important information to their participants. The grassroots leaders of Toa Payoh View RC use these weekly gatherings to share information of forthcoming grassroots events, government policies, and major local and national issues. Various government agencies had used Coffee Corner as a platform for community outreach, for example:

- Pioneer Generation Office⁴ had explained their policies to residents;
- National Health Care Groups setting up community Health Post;
- Health Promotion Board and Central Singapore Council conducted a series of health and legal awareness talks as well as healthy lifestyle activities;
- Singapore Police Force had explored scams, crime prevention and awareness;
- National Environmental Agency conducted a series of cleanliness and recycling talks.

They had also arranged for the volunteers to come and share about SG Secure and its related activities. Residents get to learn about fire-fighting skills, cardiopulmonary resuscitation (CPR), and automated external defibrillator (AED). At times, the RC also organises outings. Some of these trips include visiting a fire station, going shopping or to the cinema after having coffee at Block 122.

Awareness-raising is two-way and the grassroots leaders have also garnered feedback from residents and channelled it to the relevant government agencies.

Another role that Coffee Corner fulfils is to provide residents with regular RC/community

activities including health checks and subsequent follow-ups. Mr. Philip and Madam Helen mentioned that over the year, Coffee Corner has contributed to achieving the goal of helping the residents stay healthy. Toa Payoh View RC works closely with the Health Promotion Board on this. At Coffee Corner, residents can participate in a series of health-related programmes such as health talks, fit+ sessions and Zumba Gold. Additionally, the Health Promotion Board organises cooking demonstrations as well as talks about health such as 'Joint Care', 'Colon & You' and 'Ask 3 Questions'.



Photo 1: Residents attending Zumba Gold (photo courtesy of Toa Payoh View Residents' Committee)

Who Comes?

The variety of activities taking place every Saturday have basically attracted two groups of people to Coffee Corner: people who take part in exercise classes and eat later, and people who eat first and listen to a talk afterwards. Of course, there are also people who came to have breakfast, exercise and attend talks, and those who just stop by for just breakfast or coffee. Everyone is welcome.

Coffee Corner and its activities are received well by its attendees. Feedback suggests that various talks meet older adults' needs and have proven to be informative. Residents look forward to attend these weekly sessions since they are able to meet up with

⁴ Pioneer Generation Office's (PGO) 'mission was to gather and train a group of volunteer Pioneer Generation Ambassadors (PGAs) who will go door to

door to visit our Pioneers, explain to them the benefits of the PGP [Pioneer Generation Package] and answer their queries' (Singapore Government Directory 2017).

their friends and – at the same time – receive important information. *Dulce et utile*, or pleasant and useful, all at once.

What is encouraging is the fact that Coffee Corner attracts many young and enthusiastic volunteers to help during the sessions, allowing them to mingle with older residents. The grassroots leaders of Toa Payoh View RC have noticed that the weekly sessions have allowed the residents to bond and get to know their neighbours and friends better. It was heart-warming to hear that the relationships born at Coffee Corner sessions expand beyond the place. For instance, a group of residents went shopping together after Coffee Corner and afterwards, one of the residents invited the rest over to his house for lunch.

Mr. Philip always wanted to bring the ‘kampung spirit’ into his neighbourhood. With Coffee Corner, this was partly achieved. The vision for the Coffee Corner is to bring together children, adults and older adults who would use this space – to create ‘home away from home’.

When asked about what makes Coffee Corner so successful, Mr. Philip and Mdm. Helen mentioned that one of the important ingredients was great People’s Association’s staff, Mdm. Judy Foo, and good timing. The key critical success factors were people who wanted to do it, the cost was covered, and they had Mr Chee Hong Tat, Senior Minister of State for Health, and Communications & Information, Adviser to Bishan-Toa Payoh GRC GROs and Mr. Clarence Poon’s, RC Chairman, support. Getting the support of RC members with regard to their plan and vision was the first hurdle to be overcome. And when they crossed that first hurdle, there was the question of sustaining the event itself.

Fortunately, Coffee Corner caught on quickly and has never been more popular. In the beginning, Coffee Corner was supposed to be serving 12 blocks from 116 to 128 (127 is a food court and

market). But, word spread quickly and residents from other neighbouring blocks had started to visit it.



Photo 2: Coffee Corner at Block 122 (photo courtesy of Toa Payoh View Residents’ Committee)

Box 1: Coffee Corner – Not Just Serving Coffee

- Meeting place
- Platform for distributing and obtaining information
- Health education
- Opportunities to take part in various exercise and educational activities.

Other Cafés for Older Adults in Singapore

Coffee Corner at Block 122 in Toa Payoh West is not the only such café in town. Inspired by the Japanese *Ibasho* project (Kiyota et al. 2015), a café run by older adults for older adults was opened in Bukit Batok in the beginning of October 2017. It is funded by Reach Community Services and a Ministry of Health programme called ‘City for All Ages’ (Tan 2017). The café is open every Friday from 9am to 12pm and is run by older volunteers. It operates on the ‘pay-as-you-wish’ basis and aims to encourage older adults to come out of their homes and socialise with others.

In Bishan, one can find a coffee shop at Kim San Leng Food Centre that caters to older adults with dementia. It is the first dementia-friendly coffee shop in Singapore. The shopkeepers have been

trained to recognise people with dementia and cater appropriately to their needs (Lin 2017).

Alzheimer's Disease Association (ADA) organises trips for people with dementia and their caregivers to selected eateries, where they can enjoy their meal and each other's company in a dementia-friendly environment. This programme is called 'Memories Café' and it includes 'engagement activities such as sing-alongs, music performances, and drama activities led by staff, community artists and volunteers' (Foo 2017). In 2017, ADA also established ADA Cafe at Agape Village in Toa Payoh. This is the first café in Singapore where people with mild and early-stage dementia can work.

According to Mr. Philip Phajan Singh, there are also other community centres (CCs) or RCs that are organising breakfast gatherings for their older residents. Some even come to Coffee Corner to learn from them.

Box 2: Cafés for Older Adults in Singapore

- Coffee Corner, Toa Payoh West
- Café in Bukit Batok
- Coffee Shop for people with dementia, Bishan
- Memories Café programme and ADA Cafe at Agape Village in Toa Payoh
- Various CC or RCs across Singapore.

Conclusion

Cafés for older adults seem to provide a good meeting place and an important platform for disseminating information to older adults. They can help address social isolation and loneliness among older people, make older people feel 'useful' again (e.g. when they serve at the café or are involved in its organisation), and bring together different generations. Yet, for such cafés to be successful, they have to grow organically. Users have to play a role in its organisation, that is, take ownership, and organise coffee sessions on a

regular basis. Only then, they can become as desired and appreciated as Coffee Corner at Blk 122.

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