

LEE LIMING  
PROGRAMME IN  
AGEING URBANISM

Design initiatives to  
facilitate healthy  
ageing<sup>1</sup>

Japan

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As Singapore faces potential issues that arise from an ageing population, Japan is one of the countries from which we might be able to look towards for potential solutions for these issues. With over one in four citizens aged 65 and above (Cai, 2017), different Japanese prefectures and cities offer practices that have been in existence for at least half a century (Lebra & Maretzki, 1963) and innovative urban initiatives that could be adapted for Singapore.

Lessons for healthy ageing can be taken from Okinawa Island and Kashiwa City. Okinawa Island, a southern Japanese prefecture, and Kashiwa city, situated in Chiba Prefecture in eastern Japan, excel in facilitating healthy ageing. In collaboration with the Institute of

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<sup>1</sup> This is an evolving database. We will be adding more examples and cases over time.

Gerontology at the University of Tokyo and UR Urban Organization, Kashiwa City has embarked on a social experiment since 2009, increasing opportunities for meaningful employment among residents aged 65 and above (University of Tokyo, Institute of Gerontology, 2017). Okinawa Island has one of the world's healthiest older adult populations, among whom there are significantly lower prevalence rates of age-related chronic diseases, such as coronary heart disease (Suzuki, Wilcox, & Wilcox, 2001). Moreover, older adults in Okinawa tend to be able to enjoy life's simple pleasures (Buettner, 2008), reflective of more positive attitudes to one's own ageing experiences (Laidlaw, Power, Schmidt, & WHOQOL-OLD Group, 2007). More positive attitudes to one's own ageing experiences are in turn associated with higher levels of mental well-being (Bryant et al., 2012).

### *Okinawan traditions and Kashiwa City's innovations*

Among other traditions on Okinawa Island, maintaining a *moai* is viewed as an important avenue for facilitating social connections among older adults (Mishra, 2009). *Moai* is a Japanese term that refers to a close group of friends who meet regularly, and provide each other with emotional support, as well as financial support in times of need (Buettner, 2008). Having more social connections has

been found to be associated with lower mortality rates among older adults in the United States (Liu & Newschaffer, 2011).

In Singapore, neighbourhoods can be designed to provide opportunities for people of similar hobbies and interests to interact within walking and biking distance, and on a regular basis. Such designs facilitate the maintenance of social connections that promotes healthy ageing. CareElderly Senior Activity Centre in Macpherson is an example of such a facility in Singapore where activities are organised to engage older adults living within the neighbourhood in meaningful activities such as light exercises.

In addition to the facilitation of social connections through maintaining *moai*, older Okinawans do a lot of walking and gardening. Almost all Okinawan centenarians engage in gardening or had once engaged in gardening (Buettner, 2008). Gardening provides physical activity and facilitates stress reduction. It is also a source of fresh vegetables that contribute to a healthy diet (Mishra, 2009). Okinawans also engage in daily walking for commuting and recreational purposes (Mishra, 2009). Moreover, there is little furniture within Okinawan houses, with residents having meals and relaxing on tatami mats on the floor. Having to get up and sit down on the floor several times a day provides opportunities for older Okinawans to build

lower body strength and balance, and helps protect against falls (Buettner, 2008).

In Singapore, more neighbourhoods can be designed to provide opportunities for residents to grow their own vegetables and flowers, and to encourage residents of all ages to walk more often and for greater distances. Community gardens (National Parks, 2016) have already been implemented in Singapore, and more publicity for these gardens, as well as more of such gardens, could encourage more older adults to take up gardening as a physical activity and hobby. Walking is one of the most accessible physical activities, and even leisure walking has been found to have health benefits (Salguero, Martínez-García, Molinero, & Márquez, 2011).

Complementing age-old Okinawan traditions in facilitating healthy ageing in Japan are social innovations that have been implemented in Kashiwa City in Chiba Prefecture. These innovations have been implemented by the local authorities of Kashiwa City, in collaboration with the Institute of Gerontology at the University of Tokyo and UR Urban Organization (a business organization with businesses in areas such as city revitalization. One of the main aims of the social innovations implemented in Kashiwa City is the promotion of *ikigaijurou* (engaging in meaningful work that facilitates purpose of living) that provides solutions to

the needs of the city at the same time (University of Tokyo, Institute of Gerontology, 2017).

In Singapore, opportunities for *ikigaijurou* can be created through coordinating the efforts of urban planners, employers, and education facilities for adult learners. Urban planning initiatives that incorporate elements such as mini-farms, rooftop gardening, and community restaurants can provide second career opportunities for retirees who have an interest in farming, cooking and providing other services needed in the food and beverage industry to continue working in job roles that they enjoy. Employers can facilitate *ikigaijurou* by adopting organizational policies, such as high performance work practices that focus on training, rewards and participation (Jiang, Lepak, Hu, & Baer, 2012; Sun, Aryee, & Law, 2007) and flexible working arrangements, for example flexible working hours, that facilitate meaningful employment of older adults. Education facilities can be situated within neighbourhoods that older adults reside in, so that going for skills retraining would become more convenient for them, and educators can collaborate with employers to provide courses that retrain older adults on skills that are required by employers, for example caregiving of other older adults with specific medical conditions like dementia or childcare skills. Employment of older adults in childcare

facilities can also facilitate intergenerational bonding.

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