

Taking a fresh look at nursing home designs

Architecture firms roped in for project to improve facades and living environments

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After the Ministry of Health (MOH) built a new nursing home in Yew Tee last year, a nearby resident complained that it was an eyesore.

He was so upset with the “gaudy yellow and green trim” of the nursing home’s facade that he complained to the area’s Member of Parliament Lawrence Wong and even wrote to the media.

The complaint led the Health Ministry to repaint the walls last May.

Such complaints will hopefully become a thing of the past, with a national project under way to come up with designs that can help nursing homes blend with high-density neighbourhoods, while providing quality care for seniors.

The Government has appointed the National University of Singapore (NUS) to lead the project.

The project team comprises officials, academics, architects, elder-care experts and industry players such as nursing home operators.

“With an ageing population, nursing homes will be an important part of our community,” said the project’s leader, Associate Professor Fung John Chye from the NUS School of Design and Environment.

“It is therefore important to understand and assess how the design of the homes can better promote mutual interaction and understanding within the community.”

He added: “This study is part of MOH’s continuous efforts to ensure nursing homes are designed to meet present and future needs.”

The project brief issued by NUS highlighted several aspects of current nursing homes that can be improved.

“The physical environment of many nursing homes and a model of care premised on management efficiency are areas of deep concern,” said NUS in the report.

While single and double rooms are the norm in homes in Britain and the United States, most here offer six- to eight-bedded rooms. Such dorm-like settings are falling out of favour as people start to value their privacy and autonomy.

“This research in design is useful, especially if we want to future-proof our nursing homes and avoid costly changes because the current dorm-style norm for residential care will not meet the rising needs and aspirations of Singaporeans,” said Mr Lee Poh Wah, chief executive of Lien Foundation.

It is funding a new nursing home with single and twin rooms, to be ready by next year in Changi.

The MOH had said it was trying out new designs for nursing homes, and working with providers on models of care that give residents greater independence and autonomy.

A result of that was the MOH’s pilot of the new Ren Ci home in Ang Mo Kio, which was opened last August and built to look like HDB flats. On each of its eight floors, there are three “households”, each with four rooms containing four beds, three bathrooms and a shared activity and dining area.

Said Ms Loh Shu Ching, chief executive of Ren Ci: “The household-living concept supports the person-centred care model which empowers seniors to age with dignity, respect and self-reliance.

“Our new nursing home is a clear illustration of how the physical environment, model of care and integration with community can be the



The facade of a nursing home in Yew Tee was repainted last May after a resident who lived nearby complained that it was an eyesore. A project is now under way to come up with designs that can help nursing homes blend with high-density neighbourhoods, while providing quality care for seniors. ST PHOTO: TIMOTHY DAVID

solution towards nursing homes of the future.”

Seventeen firms participated when NUS invited architecture firms to take part in the design search last month. Among them were local firms such as DP Architects, CPG Consultants and Ong & Ong, as well as global ones such as Detoo Architects and Silver Thomas Hanley International.

“The architectural design research firms will be involved in the research phase so that they can develop better designed solutions based on the findings,” said Prof Fung. These firms are vying to be appointed design consultants by the MOH when the ministry builds nursing homes in the future.

To win the appointment, the firms have to come up with designs for a typical 10-storey nursing home with about 300 beds, occupying about the size of half a football field.

The design also has to include day-care facilities for about 60 seniors, according to the design guidelines for the architecture firms seen by *The Sunday Times*.

The top designs will be selected by officials, including those from NUS, MOH and the Urban Redevelopment Authority. The firms will be evaluated in two stages. First, up to six firms will be selected to present their concepts and designs. They will receive \$60,000 each. From these, the panel will select up to two to develop their ideas and concepts. These firms will receive another \$180,000 each.

The top designs are expected to be selected by early next year.

Said Prof Fung: “The architectural design research is expected to yield both general principles and specific design features, some of which could be applied to future homes while others adapted for retrofitting existing facilities.”

Findings and designs may also be incorporated into current and future guidelines, he added.

Ms Peh Kim Choo, chief executive of Tsao Foundation which specialises in ageing issues and runs services for the elderly, said the study is timely as a discussion is needed on what kind of residential care facilities people want to see in future.

However, she said focusing on hardware is not enough. “To actualise a person-centred care model and its integration in the community requires a mindset shift in those who are operating the hardware.”

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PLANNING AHEAD

This study is part of MOH’s continuous efforts to ensure nursing homes are designed to meet present and future needs.



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