



January 2012

Our future selves

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Recommended Citation

(2012) "Our future selves," *SIGNED: The Magazine of The Hong Kong Design Institute*: , 40-45.

Available at: <https://repository.vtc.edu.hk/ive-de-signed/vol1/iss1/31>

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A KENSINGTON
ELDER

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In 2009 **DR. YANKI LEE** initiated a series of projects to challenge the concept of ageing as a problem to be solved, choosing instead to cast the ageing process as unique experience for each individual and a culture from which design lessons can be drawn. Her research is leading to a series of innovative design projects that will benefit all segments of the community.

TOGETHER WITH COLLABORATORS in design and social science Yanki Lee launched the DESIGN.LIVES Projects in 2009 to facilitate the process of inclusive design, by which she means design that caters to the needs of everybody in the community, whatever their age. The project views design for the elder members of the community as a process of “design for our future selves” given that everybody who lives long enough will one day be “old”.

The overall mission of the DESIGN.LIVES lab is to educate

art and design students and design professionals to empathise with and understand other people’s lives as part of their creative process; to engage social workers and their organisations so that they understand and participate in the art and design process; and inspire public policy makers to develop creative solutions through art and design projects.

To reach their goals DESIGN.LIVES collaborated with the Hong Kong British Council, Hong Kong Design Centre, MaD and the Royal College of Art and Royal Society of Arts to develop a series of design

research projects related to ageing and ability. The project developed an intercultural agenda called “Ingenuity and Ageing” which is investigating creative methods to draw upon the insights of ingenious older people in places such as London and Beijing. As part of this process Dr Lee also conducted a series of DESIGN.LIVES Labs with the theme of + Age-ing in place (s) aimed at young designers and targeted at developing intergenerational design projects that engaged with aged people.

1 +AGEING IN KENSINGTON, LONDON, UK

THE METHODS LAB was started in 2008 for design students at the Royal College of Art (RCA), London to learn about inclusive design methodology and interdisciplinary collaboration. In 2010, it officially became part of AcrssRCA interdisciplinary collaboration week. Its theme focused on Ageing in Kensington: exploring design for our future selves. The five-day version of the Methods Lab in Nov 2010 involved 36 students from nine RCA departments and visitors from the Media, Art & Design Faculty (MAD) in Genk, Belgium. The students worked together in teams with local residents from

Kensington as their ‘creative partners’. Kensington was chosen not only for its proximity to the RCA but because it has one of the highest life expectancies in the UK. Participating students were guided through a five-step inclusive design process to develop a proposal that introduced social change through design. Each team worked with an older resident from the local area who became their creative partner. They investigated their lifestyle and co-developed design proposals that improved the local area and enabled people to attain a more sustainable lifestyle in Kensington that creates a balance among social, economic and ecological issues.

AGEING AND AN ACTIVE LIFE ARE
INCREASINGLY SYNONYMOUS



ACTIVE MEMEBERS OF THE TSINGHUA ELDER COMMUNITY

2 +AGEING IN TSINGHUA, BEIJING, CHINA

WITH PENSIONS EQUAL to half of their salaries before retirement, apartments for life, a familiar environment and a connected community, more than 6000 retired academics are actively ageing on Beijing's Tsinghua University Campus in China. Tsinghua University is one of China's top higher education institutions and just celebrated its 100th anniversary. It features first-class learning and

advanced facilities in science and technology with more than 30,000 staff members and students. Many of its retirees are scientists who have respectable social status as subject experts as well as mentors for many China's key political leaders. This makes the Tsinghua community a perfect laboratory for the study of successful ageing.

Working in collaboration with sociologists, gerontologists and

design experts in both China and the UK, this study aimed to explore the lifestyles and aspirations of this group in order to find new ways to tackle ageing issues. This year-long project (Dec 2010- Dec 2011) is part of the UK-China fellowship of Excellence programme funded by the UK's Department of Business Innovation and Skill (BIS). The award enables young researchers from the UK to conduct

DESIGNLIVES

DESIGNLIVES

cutting-edge research in a Chinese institution and Dr Lee conducted this study to engage with this prestigious group of older people who were the cream of the nation in the second half of the 20th century. This group of Chinese intellectuals is actively resisting the clichéd general features of 'old age', and have insisted upon maintaining a strong Tsinghuaian communal identity.

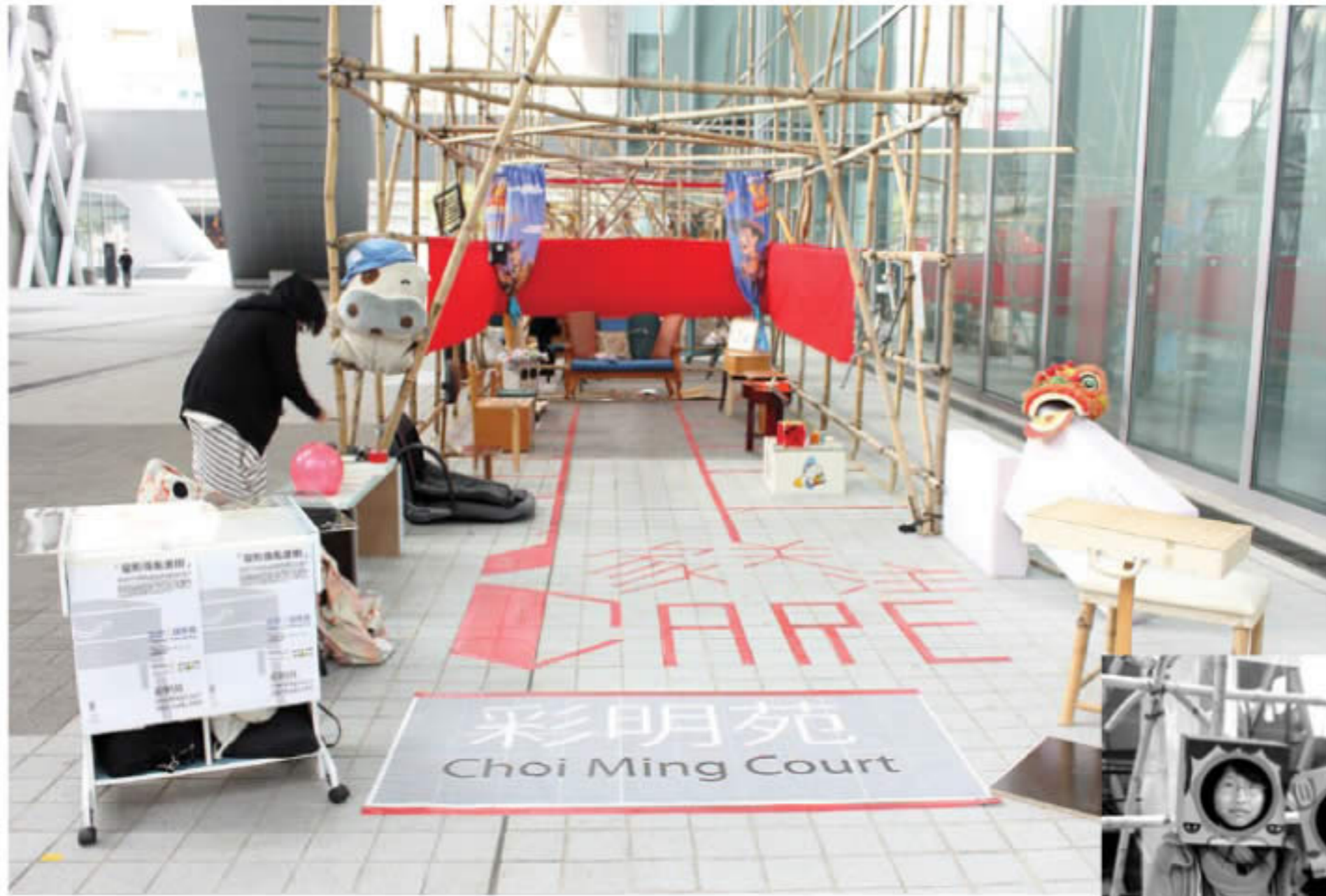
The research methodology employed by Dr Lee and her colleagues was a participatory design approach that functioned through a series of design events that had been planned to coincide with five traditional Chinese festivals on the Tsinghua University Campus. The goal was to capture the living strategies of the residents, their pursuit of personal ambitions and the way

they sought to make a continued "contribution to the nation" through "the continuation of labour". In parallel with this strategy, the design research also employed the methodology of reflexive ethnography in its interactions with a core group of around 20 scientists aged over 80. In this approach ageing is viewed as a "culture" with the capacity to inspire creative designs.

IN ORDER TO introduce a solution-focused design methodology to address the specific subject of social inclusion for elders, Dr Lee was invited to conduct a three-week DESIGN.LIVES Lab at the HKDI. Instead of conducting a research project about developing design solutions for the ageing population, Dr Lee expanded the focus from aged people to the ageing process and design solutions for “our future selves”.

Six teams were formed with over 30 Higher Diploma design students from three-design discipline: Interiors, Products and Graphic Design. A three-week design workshop was organised for students to experience solution-focused design and participatory methodology in design within the local community. Students were briefed to act creatively about the concept of design outside their disciplines and beyond. Each team was responsible for designing “something” with the residents of an estate adjacent to the design school.

There were three stages of the three-week workshop, from problem solving to solution focused. In the first week, Dr Lee allows more free space for the students to practice problem-solving methodology as they researched the issue through visits, interviews and data mining. In this part of the project Dr Lee conducted short design exercises to give students a chance to present their tentative results and build team spirit. In the second week, students’ habitual ways of knowing were challenged. A social designer from Brazil conducted games with students in order to understand the significance of non-verbal experiences. At this stage, students were asked to invite residents from their assigned estates to join a tea party at the design school. In a tutorial section, DESIGN.LIVES ideas about



THE HKDI DESIGN.LIVES PROJECT IN TIU KENG LENG



3 +AGEING IN TIU KENG LENG, HONG KONG

solution-focused methodology and participatory design. In the third week, students were responsible for setting up six design booths to create a Chinese New Year Market to “sell ideas” to the local residents, in order to build bridges between the design school and the residents of the six estates in the neighbourhood.

The brief to students was unlike ordinary design projects during their study. They were not asked for a final design proposal but to design participations that engaged residents. A local bamboo structure master was commissioned to build six traditional temporary market stalls for the six teams to install their designs. Instead

of designing objects for sale to celebrate Chinese New Year, students were asked to design means of participation to engage the local community. Each team was guided to identify an object to represent their experience and to design their booth around the object. After two days of construction, the final task for each team was to “run” their stalls and develop operational ideas for further interactions with residents. There was a team who aimed to encourage residents to have more physical interactions than online debates, they used balloon as a means to invite people to leave messages for the others. Similarly, one team was focused on

developing methods for residents especially with those are disabled to express their wishes, they collected fallen leaves for people to write messages on and send to others. A big lantern was constructed with colourful colanders to attract visitors to make Chinese New Year wishes. Recycling was a popular issue among the design students and two teams collected waste from housing estates to reconstruct something and send back to the community. One team used old newspapers to create plant pots for local residents. Another team collected unwanted furniture and deconstructed them into new pieces of furniture to demonstrate new uses.

THE NEXT STEP – LIVEABILITY AND DESIGN

AFTER ALL THESE experiments and reflections, a new project, Designing Liveable Cities for all Age and Abilities is being planned to bring interdisciplinary collaborators from different cultures to work together and co-develop new perspectives of design to address ageing, youth and social inclusion through citizen participation.

Dr Lee is a design advocate, researcher and educator of design participation who has founded a design gallery & consultancy, EXHIBIT at Golden Lane Estate (www.exhibit-goldenlane.com) in London. She is also a research fellow at the Helen Hamlyn Centre for Design at the Royal College of Art. With an MA in Architecture from the Royal College of Art and a PhD in design participation from Hong Kong Polytechnic University, Yanki focuses on design methodology for participation and social innovation. She is co-investigator of UK’s EPSRC funded i-Design 3 Inclusive Design Research Project (2006-2010) and Public Engagement Project, ‘Design Our Tomorrow (DOT)’ which is introducing inclusive design methodology to the UK secondary school Design & Technology curriculum. Dr Lee is the holder of the UK’s BIS UK - China Fellowship of Excellence 2011.

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