

The Senior • The Designer

Co-designing a friendly park furniture for children and elders



In Hong Kong, seniors used to be stereotyped as a group that needed to be taken care of in our society. However, if they are given an opportunity, they are able to play an active role in improving our community. The co-design projects done by the seniors and a group of designers at Morse Park in 2017 were a good example to showcase the elderly's active participation. 18 senior citizens were invited to brainstorm ideas for designing public furniture which was friendly to kids and the elderly in the parks. Featured with aerodynamic design, the bench and other public furniture not only aesthetically looked beautiful but also facilitated interaction with the users. The members of the design team, Robert Wong, Rosalia Leung, Julian Tsao and Gwyneth Chan were glad to share the story and experience about the project with us.

The genesis of this project began in 2017, which was the 20th anniversary of the establishment of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (HKSAR). To celebrate the event, the Art Promotion Office (APO)



of the Leisure and Cultural Services Department (LCSD) organized an event called “City Dress Up: Seats • Together”. This public art project was introduced to twenty venues managed by LCSD: parks, waterfront promenades, leisure areas and playgrounds across 18 districts in Hong Kong. These 20 sets of innovative and artistic furniture were set up to enrich the cityscape and beautify the city.

Joshua Lau, one of the art project curators at APO, invited Robert to revitalise the Morse Park elderly exercise zone and re-design 12 existing benches there with the theme of “Public Furniture for senior citizens”. As the former assistant director of Hong Kong Sheng Kung Hui Welfare Council (Welfare Council), one of the largest non-government organisations



(NGOs) in Hong Kong at that time, Robert had extensive experience working with the elderly and coming up with user-friendly and creative design ideas for renovation projects of elderly centres and residential care homes. Hence, the “Seats • Together project” just appeared as another opportunity for Robert’s team to bring the elderly into the community, listen to their voice, integrate their creativities and co-create age- and child-friendly park facilities in Morse Park.

A total of 18 seniors were invited from the elderly centres, which were managed by the Welfare Council, to participate in “The Senior • The Designer” project. All of them came from the elderly concern groups at the elderly centres located in Western District, Wong Tai Sin, To Kwa Wan and Hung Hom. With the assistance from the social workers, the elders had been promoting an age-friendly environment by reaching out to the community, looking for good practices and sharing their findings and opinions with the district councillors. Although they had the experience getting involved in community improvement projects, it was their first time designing public facilities for the community.

Starting from sketch to experience as a designer

There were two design workshops organised in the project and aimed at guiding the elderly participants to become user experience designers. The first workshop was scheduled into 2 parts on the same day. In the morning, the design team gave a briefing session about the project to all participants and brought them to Morse Park for a site visit. The elderly were guided by questions such as what the size of the chair would be, what types of outdoor chairs were considered comfy, and what was considered an adequate outdoor space, the participants were all excited to further brainstorm their ideas. They even did the site measurement, and pencil down all the relevant details.

In the afternoon session, the elderly were divided into 3 groups. Referring to the printed images of creative benches in different parks in the world, the elders were invited to brainstorm and explore innovative design options. At the same time, this design process also allowed the team to understand more about the senior members’ preferences regarding the type and materials of the benches. “These photos show the most beautiful extraordinary design of the benches in the world.” Robert commented, “Why can it happen in other countries, but not in Hong Kong? This also gives a great opportunity for our senior citizens without any art background to appreciate the artwork. After the workshop, the elders became more open-minded to these designs. We realized that everyone loves good and creative design. No one is an exception.”

In the workshop, the design team also provided the participants with mini models to visualize their desired space in the parks. At the first instance, the participants were not quite familiar with tools for design, such as yellow tracing paper, and craft materials for designers. When the team invited the elders using yellow tracing paper to draft their design ideas; instead, they asked the social workers for some white paper to sketch. The elders thought that the yellow tracing paper was expensive and could only be used by professional designers. At that moment, the designers felt the





knowledge gap between the professionals and the public in terms of design experience and perception of design materials.

Nonetheless, by spending time interacting with the elderly group and explaining to them the usage of tracing paper and other materials, the participants eventually were willing to give it a try, sketched their design idea on the tracing paper and prepared the design presentation drawings. The whole process of involving the elderly in the design clearly strengthened the communication and understanding between the elderly and the designers.

Regarding the existing park furniture in LCSD, the senior citizens had long been thinking about opportunities for improvement. The elders shared that they were not satisfied with the monotonic and standard design of the seats with their limited functionality. They expected the seats could be used in multiple and diverse ways. “The elderly would want to enjoy the time with their families in the parks,” Rosalia described, “But, the facilities in the LCSD parks are usually categorised by age group. The seniors stay in the elderly exercise area, while the kids would do their activities in another zone. When the elderly take care of their grandchildren in the kid zone, there are no facilities available for their personal needs.” Most of the elderly expressed their wish to hang out with their family members closely in the parks such as having picnics, chit-chatting and gathering.





Elderly-friendly design features: a small hook and a recess in the chair armrest

While the design team expected the elderly designers to prefer the seats with a more conservative style – plain and regular shape, their creativity went beyond the team’s expectations. As Gwyneth recalled, an elderly design team sketched and designed a rainbow seat that allowed users to place their electronic products such as an iPad or a laptop. “People used to have the impression that senior citizens only play chess for leisure at parks, but it is untrue. Rather than staying with this traditional form of entertainment, they also wish for a cosy spot to enjoy surfing the internet with their mobile phones in public, as well as taking pictures with their grandchildren at the check-in points whenever possible.”

When the elders’ sketches and presentation materials were finished, the senior designers were invited to present their design ideas in front of the government officials, as if it was being presented to a real professional designer. Prior to the 3-hour workshop, the concept of “design” sounded completely foreign to them. Without a doubt, this came up as a huge challenge for them to explain their design ideas.

After the presentation, the design team summarized and integrated all the thoughts into a “Design Brief” and started to prepare the conceptual design drawings. There were two essential design features: (1) a creative aerodynamic design, and (2) the park furniture should be friendly to allow activities for both kids and elderly users.

Creative ideas stimulated innovations to inspire new artwork. The curvilinear and wavy seat of the bench allowed the grandparents and their grandchildren to sit on either side. A large table, with two tree trunks protruding from its centre, provides face-to-face seating and a comfortable environment for the elderly and their family to enjoy meals together in the shade, a perfect location for a picnic. This was a wholly different setting compared to the traditional seats we usually found in the park.

During the workshop, elders shared that they used to hang their belongings on the backrest of the seat, but frequently forgot about them. The design team paid a lot of attention to the design of seating to address the elders’ concerns. In the new design, a small hole with a fixed hook installed at the front of the seat and the armrest, not only reminded the

elderly to put their frequently carried items; an S-shaped hook, umbrella, pole and grocery bag but was obvious enough for them to be aware of their own belongings, due to its immediate visibility.

To respond to the elders’ design concept of promoting interaction between children and elders, the design team also designed a wavy-shaped check-in wall with multiple holes that allowed kids to show their faces. Elders would take pictures with the children. It would bring a lot of fun to both grandparents and their grandkids.

To let the elders visualise the design idea, Rosalia and Julian spent two weeks preparing a 1-to-1 ratio mock-up on-site. LCSD agreed with the design team to take down the existing seats in the morning and to reset the venue back to its original setting before 6 pm every day so as to minimize disruption to the park operation. They



had to measure the size and positions of the new seats by laying the papers on the ground and building up the seating model with the prefabricated corrugated cardboard within a limited period.

During the mock-up visit, the design team prepared the elders a rainbow-like array of colours to determine the seat colour, but unfortunately, none of the colours was selected. Robert smiled and recalled that “We did not hear a word to complain about the choices of colour but some rambling such as ‘Oh my gosh! These seem like the colours the kindergarten children would like!’.” He continued, “In the end, we discovered the elders’ preference of the natural wood colour, so the light wood colour was applied to the final design.” Also, the design team designed children’s chairs with blue and yellow, where they could sit back-to-back and play with each other. With a limited design background, our elderly participants did not make judgement of the colour only based on their own preferences but rather based on the users’ need. This is considered one of the impacts of participatory design on the users.

At the opening ceremony, a mini party took place in the seating area in the park. Everyone tried out the facilities in a real-life setting. As Gwyneth remembered, a grandmother came to her excitedly when she arrived in the park. “This was designed by me!” She screamed while pointing her finger at the hooks installed on the handles on the tables and seats. “With such simple words, we knew we had attained the original goal of the project.”



Robert’s team was invited by the World Health Organisation, the United Nations Human Settlements Programme (UN-Habitat) and the American Institute of Architects (AIA) New York Chapter to share with international professionals, scholars and policymakers about the participatory design experience with the elderly in the age-friendly design forum. The project was highlighted as an exemplar of the integration and involvement of the ageing population within the community. Robert suggested: “Forum attendants were surprised at the fact that we were able to carry out this project and deliver it successfully. They are all seeking an approach that encourages and engages their community’s senior citizens to get involved with the community. In my opinion, if the government were to leave more space for us to conduct these types of social experiments for similar projects, more possibilities would be explored and discovered.”

5 critical factors facilitating a successful participatory design project

Since 2005, the World Health Organization had developed the Global Age-Friendly Cities project across multiple cities and subsequently. The “Global Age-Friendly Cities and Network”, a concept established in 2010 defined the eight aspects of significance to the well-being of older people: outdoor spaces and buildings; transportation; housing; social participation; respect and social inclusion; civic participation and employment; communication and information; and community support and health services. This participatory design project served as a pioneer work to use design as a medium to focus on the aspects of “outdoor space and building” and “social participation” in solving ageing problems.

To engage the elders in participatory design, there are multiple determining factors:

1. Target the right audience

Leading the elders for a site visit involved a variety of preparation works beforehand such as programme planning, purchasing the appropriate insurance, rental of the shuttle bus, and risk assessment. Besides, the

number of participants who were invited from the elderly centres was a point of concern. If all the elders were selected from only one elderly centre, it would be rather difficult to convince the social worker and service-in-charge. Instead, elderly participants coming from a number of elderly centres could reduce the risk. Close collaboration between the elderly centres and the design team is required. For the elderly recruitment, the social workers helped look for active elders who are enthusiastic about community projects. Before the project implementation, the design team and social workers would need to meet up to plan the programme details.

2. Enhance familiarity by integrating the design project into a casual day trip

Although the elderly members of the concern group were invited to the project, they were not always familiar with the design work. “Design” is a vague concept in their daily lives. Instead of naming it as a design project, the elders were invited to partake in a day trip called “Exploration to age-friendly space”. Through the trip, it was anticipated that the elderly participants became familiar with the space and environment around them. The elderly had the chance to understand design concepts and how design could be applied to their daily lives.

3. Trust building: Social workers as friends

Social workers in the elderly centres played an irreplaceable role in the design project. They built up trust with the elders and served as a bridge to connect the design team with the elderly participants. As a facilitator, the social workers helped both parties exchange their opinions. They also encouraged the group members to express themselves when they felt hesitant to present their own design ideas in front of everyone.

4. Empathise the elders’ needs and understand their daily schedule

After the project's completion, the official project celebration was originally scheduled in July 2017. However, the social workers shared that summer was not ideal for the elderly to go out for site visits due to the hot and humid weather. Taking care of the elders’ health and physical conditions, the celebration was postponed to winter in December 2017. Also, long-duration activities on the day trip were not encouraged. As a thoughtful and caring programme organiser, it was vital to respect every stakeholder. For example, the elderly usually followed a regular schedule, such as lunch at 12 noon and dining at 5 pm. This meant that only a limited

amount of time was left for the purposes of the design project. The design team always has to make a balance between the users’ involvement and the outcome.

5. Collaborate with government departments

The design project in Morse Park required approval from different government departments, including the Leisure & Cultural Services Department (LCSD) and the Architectural Services Department (ArchSD). With strong support from the Art Promotion Office, approval from LCSD and ArchSD was finally obtained. The programme organisers and project designers would need patience in the liaison and collaboration under the government bureaucracy, and allow sufficient time in the programme planning. In this project, thanks to LCSD’s adjustment to its operations and accommodation to the project request in displaying the 1-to-1 mock-up on-site to showcase the creative design work, the design project was successfully completed in Morse Park.

CASE STUDY



The Seniors, The Designer — an age-friendly design park furniture project

Duration
2016-2018

Location
Morse Park, Wong Tai Sin, Hong Kong

Cooperation Organisations
Art Promotion Office, Leisure and Cultural Services Department, HKSAR Government

Design Team
Robert Wong, Rosalia Leung, Chiling Cho, Gwyneth Chan

Stakeholders’ Participation
18 elders in 4 elderly centres in Hong Kong
(HKSCH Wong Tai Sin District Elderly Community Centre, HKSCH Western District Elderly Community Centre, SKH Holy Carpenter Church District Elderly Community Centre, HKSCH Lok Man Alice Kwok Integrated Service Centre)