



FUTURE-PROOFING ELDERLY CARE

AAMER ARCHITECTS' COMPETITION-WINNING DESIGN FOR A SENIORS' HOME ADDRESSES THE EVOLVING NEEDS OF ELDERLY CARE.

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IMAGES » AAMER ARCHITECTS (COURTESY OF ST JOHN'S HOME FOR ELDERLY PERSONS)



St John's Home for Elderly Persons has operated for nearly six decades in Wan Tho Avenue, Upper Serangoon. Earlier this year, a new Government lease was granted for the site, but the land area made available to the Home was reduced from the current 12,224 square metres to 3,300 square metres. A new building with a new plot ratio and a new capacity (for 150 elderly persons, up from the current 102) is required.

The management of St John's Home deliberated on the challenge of optimising the land area and creating a future-ready Home. "When the Home was established back in 1958," says Woon Wee Yim, Chairman of St John's Home, "things were simpler. At that time, the vision was to build a cosy, cottage-style Home for needy or homeless elderly [people]. These buildings have served us well for 58 years. But times have changed," he says. "The needs of the elderly have also changed," he adds.

Aware of the considerable challenge it faced, St John's Home partnered with the Singapore Institute of Architects (SIA) to hold a two-stage design competition for the new building, which is expected not only to cater to residents, but also to provide facilities and services to seniors from the surrounding areas.

Says Theodore Chan, Immediate Past President of the SIA, "The challenge for us architects today is to design a home for the elderly that ... meets the geriatric and environmental needs of the future. We also have to be cognizant of the fact that the digital natives of today will be the tech-savvy and well-educated elderly of the future. This is the profile of the elderly who are going to stay in the new St John's Home."

Seven of the 52 entries to the competition were shortlisted, and Aamer Architects was announced as the winner in July. The jury felt the winning scheme was set apart from the others by its compact five-storey building mass (which left space at ground level for a chapel and open programmes) and the distinctive facade character emerging from its serrated-profile plan.

Aamer Taher, Principal of Aamer Architects, suggests that as life spans increase and the elderly become more mobile, active and IT savvy, they will need spaces that cater to different hobbies and activities, and that encourage feelings of empowerment and purposefulness. "Hence, spaces need to be flexible and easily manoeuvrable, and at the same time convenient for caregivers," he says.

Residents of the new Home will be able to easily move around a variety of areas. Says Taher, "This we achieved by tilting, shifting, stacking and pulling apart the room modules so that useful in-between spaces are created, giving residents a choice of communal or more private spaces. Hence, circulation spaces are not the usual straight boring corridors, but are extruded and expanded to become social spaces that also benefit from natural light and ventilation."

Says the jury, "The scheme manages a fine balance of realistic constructability and a well-crafted vision of a place." Taher suggests that a holistic and purposeful approach to community care will benefit all. "Perhaps in future," he says, "the functions of elderly care will also include child day care amenities. We have created spaces that are flexible enough for this."

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