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 Link last year, a nearby resident complained that it was an eyesore.

He was so upset with the “grady 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 change the windows 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, elderly-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 interactions 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 promised 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 is in need of, especially if we want to future-proof our nursing homes and avoid costly changes because the current dorm-style room for residential care will not meet the rising needs and aspirations of Singaporeans,” said Mr Lee Chee Wah, chief executive of Lien Foundation.

It is funding a new nursing home with single and twin rooms, to be ready 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.

As part 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 a DBS flat. 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 Mr Lim 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 solution towards nursing homes of the future.”

Seventeen firms participating 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 Buro Happold and Wilkinson Eyre Architects and Silver Thomas Hanley International.

“The architectural design research 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 being appointed to develop designs that 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 two to develop their ideas and concepts. These firms will receive up to $100,000 each.

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

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

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

Ms Poh Kim Choo, chief executive of Tao Foundation which specialises in ageing issues and nursing 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 hardwar.”