

IN CONVERSATION: SEAH CHEE HUANG, JAN LIM AND MIZAH RAHMAN



INTERVIEW
PORTRAIT
PROJECT IMAGES

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AN ARCHITECT AND THE FOUNDERS OF A NON-PROFIT PARTICIPATORY DESIGN ORGANISATION DISCUSS THEIR EXPERIENCES OF ENGAGING THE PUBLIC IN THE DESIGN PROCESS, AND THE LEVEL OF INTEREST IN THIS APPROACH HERE IN SINGAPORE.

DESIGNING WITH PEOPLE

Above: Seah Chee Huang, a Director of DP Architects, with Jan Lim and Mizah Rahman, founders of Participate in Design



RECENT YEARS HAVE SEEN AN INCREASED LEVEL of interest from the public in matters related to Singapore's built environment. But to what extent can or does the general public have a say in the shape of the places they inhabit? This issue's 'In Conversation' feature explores the increasingly prominent field of participatory design – the realities of delivering this model of development, and the willingness with which it is being explored. Seah Chee Huang is a Director at DP Architects – a firm working on several public-sector projects where participatory methods are given prominence in the design process. Jan Lim and Mizah Rahman are the founders of Participate in Design (PID) – an organisation (founded in 2012) that has partnered with grassroots organisations, educational institutions and statutory boards to help design community-owned spaces and solutions. They begin by reflecting on when they last crossed paths.



Top: A rendering of Our Tampines Hub – a 120,000sqm development designed by DP Architects (under construction) that will combine recreational, sporting, community and culture facilities. Image credit: People's Association

Bottom: Goodlife! Makan is a senior social centre designed by DP Architects, where food-related programmes encourage the social integration of stay-alone elderly residents of Marine Parade. Image credit: DP Architects

Mizah Rahman (MR) Two years ago we did a research project. We wanted to find out what participatory design could mean for Singapore, and how everyday people might be more actively involved in the design process. We interviewed several people, from those in grassroots organisations to MPs to practising architects to social entrepreneurs. You were one of the people we spoke to, Chee Huang, because you were active on the 'Our Tampines Hub' project at the time.

Seah Chee Huang (SCH) I'm surprised that was two years ago, because I'm still working on the project and its first phase just topped up recently! I'm quite eager to see how the two of you have brought what you were discovering to another level.

But first, I'd really like to talk about this notion of participatory design. If I'm not wrong, the concept emerged in the Scandinavian context in the 1970s where it was termed as 'cooperative design' or 'co-design'. In the States, it was renamed 'participatory design', and from there the whole notion started to pick up and became more widespread.

What is interesting about participatory design, at least from an architect's perspective, is that it is already inherent in our practice. What differs is the scale and extent of it. The notion of design itself, whether it's for a space, building or product, is always to begin by understanding the purpose, the user, and the stakeholders – the ones who asked you to design something and for whom you are designing the thing in the first place. It becomes a choice of bringing them, in this case the community, actively into the discussion and design process. The ultimate objective is to create something that is responsive and purposeful. In that sense I don't see participatory design as a separate exercise. It's about the depth and intensity of it.

MR We created Participate in Design because we felt that within the current landscape of design, there is no one organisation that advocates such a cause. There was a gap we hoped to fill by providing a platform for designers or students to be exposed to community-driven design.

Jan Lim (JL) It's about thinking, "How should I actually design?" Is it just about formulating a design brief based on site research, observations and the paying client's needs? Or is there something more to it – what about the people who will be affected by the project, and their needs, voices, experiences and aspirations? Shouldn't they have a larger part to play too, especially for public or community spaces?

MR We've seen a lot of desire in people wanting to do social-good projects in the built environment

context – to use their expertise as designers to contribute to the larger community. You see a lot of that overseas, but not so much here. We saw the opportunity to challenge the current way of doing design in local spaces. We wanted to develop a much more structured way of doing participatory design in Singapore.

JL We've done quite a number of projects since the last time we spoke to you. One of the first was in MacPherson, where we were working with a seniors' home to design a public space in an under-utilised area between some HDB blocks. That was the first time we used the tools we developed to do workshops and interviews with the community.

MR The local MP had initially approached us. She could have adopted a typical process – get an architect or landscape architect involved to design a playground or landscaping or a gathering space based on a predetermined brief – but she didn't want to just do that. She wanted to use it as an opportunity to engage with the community around it. One of our main questions was how to demystify complex issues like design and architecture, and put them in very simple forms that the average aunty and uncle can understand.

JL We had to unlearn certain things. In architecture school we learn industry jargon, but all of a sudden you have to explain design concepts to someone from outside the industry and get them excited. Things like visuals help.

MR We had a pop-up session near the market, and one of the questions we asked was, "What do you hope to see in the space?" We had images of hardware and software. Hardware was things like swings, shelters and seating. Software was programmes. They could pick one piece of hardware and one piece of software. It was a way to get the conversation started with the residents in a very simple and fun way that anyone could be involved in.

After getting an initial understanding of the place, we went on to do a design workshop. That was more intimate and in-depth. We asked people to offer something positive – a possible creative solution. We asked for 'blue sky thinking' – no conventional ideas. People asked, "What is a conventional idea?" So we showed pictures of a conventional playground, for example, as well as more innovative ones. After that, the dynamics changed and people started thinking about what they really wanted to see that may be quite different from what they would otherwise see in a typical HDB upgrading process.

JL The workshop can be quite a powerful tool for changing people's perception. We really saw the

value in facilitating such a conversation.

SCH We won in the Tampines Town Hub project, currently known as Our Tampines Hub, in 2011. It's a multi-agency collaboration and they decided on day one that they wanted the wider community to participate in the design process. That triggered a whole array of related activities that contributed to the entire design process. The project, at least to me, was then the first of its kind, in terms of being a multi-stakeholder collaborative approach to a building development, with an engagement exercise that went to quite a huge extent and intensity.

MR What sort of extent are you talking about?

SCH Tampines has about 220,000 residents. The vision was to make sure that all 220,000 residents, in one way or another, were made aware of the project, and were engaged and empowered to share their points of view and play a part. It manifested into a whole array of means of engagement at different scales – from newsletters to social media channels, roadshows, focus group discussions, workshops, and even to block parties and floor parties. That was quite refreshing, as there is seldom such a level of intensive engagement.

JL Was that the first time you'd worked on a community engagement project of that scale?

SCH Yes, definitely. And the stakes were really high to make sure that the development didn't become a white elephant, but something meaningful and highly relevant for the community, by the community.

JL In the last five years or more, we have seen a bigger push by government agencies in terms of engagement. Engagement in itself is not new. In 1990 when Goh Chok Tong took over as Prime Minister, he said the next era of government would be consultative. That was probably one of the first times it was formally brought up.

Now we are seeing different agencies saying, "We need to have some kind of engagement. We don't really know what it is, but it needs to be more than just a survey." That's where we come in. The question we are really trying to ask is: "Can an everyday person be involved in a way that is deeper and more meaningful than just telling me what he or she wants to see or doesn't want to see?"

SCH Have all your clients been from the public sector?

JL No we've also had private clients. We are currently working with one in the west. The residents of a private estate want to create a community-built playground.

MR We are also currently working with a VWO [voluntary welfare organisation] on setting up a community kitchen in Yishun by closely involving senior citizens in the design process. So we'd love to hear about the kitchen project that DP has just completed.

SCH That is a very meaningful community project, 'Goodlife! Makan', which we completed recently with our client Montfort Care. The process was a less in-depth form of participatory



Above: The design of Goodlife! Makan involved observations of volunteers at work. The centre encourages residents to cook and dine together. Image credit: DP Architects

“THERE IS DEFINITELY A DIFFERENCE BETWEEN DESIGNING FOR PEOPLE AND WITH PEOPLE. HOW CAN WE ENABLE PEOPLE TO DESIGN WITH US AND WITH ONE ANOTHER?”

— MIZAN RAHMAN

design, as the main users are stay-alone elderly, and it is more challenging to engage them through typical methods. The client, a progressive social welfare organisation, was looking at alternative ways of addressing the social and psychological needs of this group of stay-alone seniors. Instead of bringing healthcare and food to their doorsteps, the initiative by Montfort Care aims to bring the seniors and community closer by having a community space for greater interaction. Being very Singaporean, food is the way to our hearts – the experience of coming together to prepare their meals allows the seniors to mingle and interact. We worked closely with Montfort Care, stakeholders and the stay-alone seniors that were more open to partake. This process required us to observe the way things are done, such as the food preparation – from getting the ingredients ready to cooking by stay-alone seniors.

MR For you, what makes a participatory design process then, and when does it tip from research and observation into engagement?

SCH That's a good question. For our design, we talk about the 3Es: engagement (when you start to have a dialogue), enrichment (to allow people to learn and understand other aspects of things they may have taken for granted), and empowering (when you can start to involve the users and allow them to influence the process of design and even, to a certain extent, the design outcome).

MR There is definitely a difference between designing *for* people and *with* people. How can we enable people to design with us and with one another? It's about capacity building – how do we impart knowledge and information to people so they can make an informed decision? In any kind of participatory design process, information is key. In order for anyone to make an informed decision, they need to be equipped with proper knowledge to facilitate that decision-making process.

JL At the end of the day, we are outsiders; we will leave the community. They are the ones who will live with what we create. It is about empowering them to take ownership of the spaces.

MR We see designers also as community organisers. How can we mobilise communities? That is an extra skill we were not taught in school.

SCH That's an interesting point about community organising. You can bring people together, you can talk, but how do you connect and touch their hearts? I think it is something quite fundamental and forms the core of the whole process.

MR It's about finding out what the motivations of the person are. You can't force participation on people. If people don't want to, you have to let

it pass. The way we do it is to open up multiple opportunities along the way, through workshops, pop-ups, et cetera, where they are invited to come.

SCH Out of curiosity, do you think of yourselves as a design studio or a participatory consultancy? Where does your work stop?

MR We think of PID as a network of design-trained community organisers.

JL For some projects, we do design and oversee the creation of the design. For others, we work with an existing architecture or design consultant and develop the design brief for them based on the community's inputs. We are non-profit and neutral. Something we're focusing on this year is advocacy. We want to champion this and push things along, and allow more designers, young people or anyone else who is interested in this idea of engagement and participatory design, to come to us and get the resources.

MR To put it simply, we are a design studio who can engage communities as well.

JL It's hard to categorise us.

MR We are playing on our strengths as architecturally trained designers and using that as a basis to get communities together – using design as a medium to do so.

SCH To an architect, I see that part of the benefit of a participatory design process is really allowing architecture to be more inclusive and accessible. I do think it is an exciting time where there is this energy and movement emerging within the social fabric and the psyche of our community here in Singapore, about generating a greater awareness of how the built environment influences or shapes the way we think. The agencies are responding appropriately to this growing consciousness with a more conversational and consultative kind of process. There are a lot more channels for exchange made available now. I am quite optimistic about the way forward.

JL The thing about participation is that it is such a long and rigorous process. Because of constraints, the question is, where do you stop? Where do you say this is when stakeholders have to take on the rest of the responsibilities?

MR After people have participated, they often want to know what happened to their ideas and their input.

SCH That follow up is important. I would say that the interesting part, like Jan mentioned, is where is the cut off? The challenge with the participatory process is the notion of time. In some projects or exercises, time is a luxury.

JL The stakeholders or the client groups have to be very invested in the whole thing, and not just



Top: PID's project 'Welcome to my Backyard' (WOBV) called the community together to reimagine an under-utilised plot of land. Photo by Nicholas Kee

Bottom: For the Tampines Changkat Neighbourhood Renewal Programme, PID designed and facilitated community engagement processes that involved different user groups. Photo by Lim Zi Song

paying lip service to validate certain notions.

SCH For DP, most projects incorporating participatory processes have so far been public sector-related. In the private sector, it's not something that is too evident yet.

JL Do you think that the government should step in and create policies that require, for example, any development to involve community engagement?

SCH That's interesting. Personally, I've always felt that such initiatives should be self-motivated and bottom-up, rather than orchestrated top-down. The top-down part should be about providing support and infrastructure, instead of making processes and matters mandatory. There is also the dimension of education – generating awareness of the benefits of this process.

MR Chee Huang, as a practicing architect, do you think architects are open to participation?

JL Do you think there's a future for participatory design in the industry?

SCH Why not? There are already signs of a growing awareness of the benefits of such a process. It ultimately contributes to the purpose of why the project started in the first place. In public-sector community projects, the purpose is often clearer and more socially inclined. The interesting part will be when the commercial element comes in. And how do you balance the commercial pressure to not compromise the social goals? To find that balance is where you find the possibility of integrating such a process into the entire ecosystem.

Architects can become a 'vehicle' for translating visions and aspirations. Ultimately you still need a 'driver' – the end users, whether it's the stakeholder or something bottom-up. Once that kind of awareness and consciousness is present, I think participatory design will naturally be a part of things.

MR Do you think there is a danger that this kind of process could be looked at cynically the more it's adopted?

SCH Yes. It can't be used as an excuse for an outcome. Have you come across architects who don't believe in this process?

MR Yes we have.

SCH As I mentioned, it is important that we be clear about the true purpose though. It should not be participation for participation's sake. If you use it as a means of justifying certain decisions or actions, then it misses the point. It's ultimately about empathy – the humanistic aspects of design.



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Top: With the self-initiated project 'Urban Explorations – Mobility Edition', PID encouraged thinking about how we navigate the city. Photo by Nicholas Kee

Bottom: With the 'WOBY!' project, PID asked residents: "What would make this your favourite place in the neighbourhood?" Photo by Lim Zi Song