



CASE STUDY

Singapore | GoodLife! Makan

# Cooking Up a Community

**D**elivering social services to the doorsteps of seniors who live alone may increase their sense of helplessness and isolation. To draw the elderly out of their homes and to give them a sense of purpose, voluntary welfare organisation Montfort Care set up the GoodLife! Makan community kitchen where seniors come together to help themselves and others.

## The Challenge

It might seem surprising that a relatively youthful city-state, which recently celebrated 50 years of independence, should already be concerned about a rapidly ageing population. Yet, Singapore's population has aged at a rate faster than most cities. Today, the elderly (residents aged 65 years and over) forms 12.4% of the resident population and the total number of seniors is projected to more than double to 900,000 in 2030.

What is equally troubling is the growing number of elderly living alone, which is estimated to increase threefold from 29,000 in 2011 to 92,000 by 2030. An increasing number of singles and the

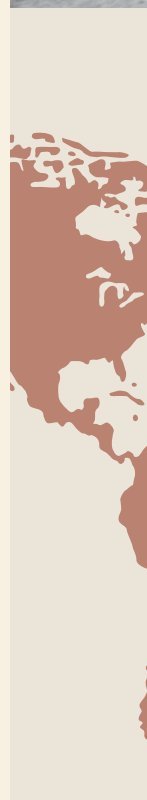
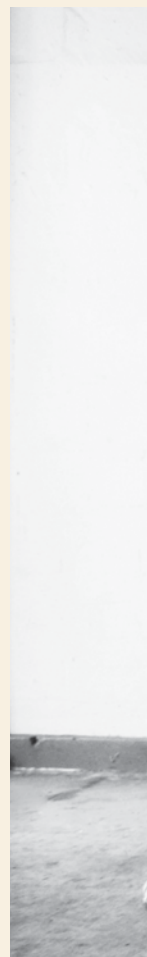
preference to maintain independence from children have contributed to the surge in seniors living alone.

Gerontological studies have emphasised the negative impacts of living alone, citing associations to increased mortality, independent of health statuses. Elderly living alone may also face social isolation and perceived loneliness which in turn, also increases mortality risks.

Social support for seniors living alone in Singapore—organised meal deliveries, home help and befriending services for example—often comes from the community. However, these services



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To prevent social isolation, the elderly who stay alone should engage in activities outside their home more.





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are often delivered right to the elderly's doorstep, leading to concerns that they would become even more cocooned in their flats.

Although there are dedicated Senior Activity Centres (SAC) that provide information, assistance and social activities for seniors living in rental flats, their efficacy depends on the frequency of usage by the individual.

Some studies have highlighted that extensive help and support given to the elderly may even result in a sense of helplessness, in turn increasing depressive symptoms.

Thus, the challenge is to find ways to support these seniors who live alone, without increasing their sense of dependency and allowing them to maintain a sense of autonomy.

## The Solution

The Marine Parade neighbourhood is a mature estate with a high senior population. The rental flats, especially, have a large number of seniors who live alone. Montfort Care, a voluntary welfare organisation, which has been providing community-based support to the Marine Parade community for 16 years, reaches out to these seniors by providing assistance and healthcare to those with one or more chronic illnesses.

However, there were concerns that the seniors would be at risk of social isolation given their limited interaction with fellow seniors and residents in the neighbourhood. In 2015, hoping to go beyond the traditional forms of support for elderly living alone, Montfort Care (supported by the Ministry of Health,

- 01 Seniors help to dry plates and cutlery before their meal.
- 02 Full-height glass doors allow natural light into the kitchen while heightening the sense of transparency.
- 03 The kitchen's open concept showcases the active seniors interacting and learning new skills.



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the Agency for Integrated Care and the Tote Board Community Health Fund) decided to change the approach towards social support for these seniors. Instead of treating them as passive recipients of help, it began to cultivate a social environment of self-help where seniors are empowered and encouraged to contribute to the community.

GoodLife! Makan (the Malay term for “eating”) community kitchen was thus born out of this desire to empower and to draw out seniors who are isolated from the community. Situated conveniently at the void deck of a block of rental flats, it is an open kitchen with full-height glass doors that are opened completely during the day. This borderless concept is a significant shift away from conventional elderly centres that are gated. The open kitchen showcases what the seniors get up to daily – highlighting them as active contributors and not passive recipients.

Every morning at 10am, 40–50 seniors would stream into the 360-square-metre kitchen to prepare the day’s meal for themselves. They would decide what they will have for lunch, who will go shopping at the nearby market and who will take charge of the different stages of preparation. Only two or three Montfort staff would be present to assist them so as to give the seniors a greater sense of ownership. The kitchen was designed for seniors of different backgrounds and profiles, with designated cooking stations for Muslims and non-Muslims.

Bright, airy and colourful, the open kitchen is a vibrant and welcoming space that encourages curious passers-by to find out more about the place, and draws other residents to interact with the seniors. Not only does it encourage seniors to take ownership of the space, it also reduces the social stigma associated with going to an elderly centre.

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## The Outcome

What might have been another typical, gated elderly centre where seniors passively receive their meals—unseen by others—has been redesigned to become a vibrant, active space for the elderly to interact and build friendships, learn new skills and rediscover a sense of purpose. It has also transformed the way the community lives and interacts with the seniors: senior volunteers have been actively baking goods for the needy seniors at GoodLife! Makan and some stallholders from an adjacent food centre voluntarily supply fresh produce free of charge to the kitchen.

As a testimony to the refreshing and innovative design, GoodLife! Makan was recently conferred “Best Project constructed under S\$2 million” at the 2016 SIA Architectural Design Awards by the Singapore Institute of Architects.

GoodLife! Makan has inspired other neighbourhoods in Singapore, such as Tampines and Hong Kah North, to start their own ground-up initiatives for the elderly in the community, using similar concepts of providing open



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and empowering spaces for seniors. The programming and design of GoodLife! Makan has instilled a confidence that our community spaces can support seniors as they age in place. As the CEO of Montfort Care, Mr Samuel Ng, puts it, we can create “a community that is redefining ageing and living”. ○

- 01 Seniors are eager to take charge of cooking, with minimal help from the volunteers.
- 02 The kitchen provides seniors with a space to engage in activities, such as colouring.
- 03 GoodLife! Makan has designated cooking stations for Muslims and non-Muslims, but seniors eat together at the same table.