



A New Design Concept: Creating Social Solutions For Old Age

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LONDON: What's the secret of a happy, healthy old age? Money? Grandchildren? Great doctors?

They all help, but not as much as the two most important ingredients: a social network of at least six people who you see regularly and freedom from worrying about everyday problems like leaking taps and broken light bulbs.

That's the conclusion of Hilary Cottam, co-founder of the social design group, Participle, after a year of analyzing the lives of the elderly residents of Southwark, one of London's poorer boroughs.

"It's staggering how little the quality of their lives is determined by income," she said.

"The secrets are being socially connected and not having to worry about minor things like changing light bulbs. If you take away the little hindrances that can stop an elderly person with limited energy from doing other things, you can make a huge difference."

Participle is now testing that theory by creating the Southwark Circle, a network of groups of several dozen seniors living near each other.

Each local circle combines the functions of a concierge service, self-help group, co-operative and social club. The project is funded by the local authority, the London Borough of Southwark, with contributions from the seniors themselves.

After six months of prototyping, the first two circles are being prepped to go live in late November, and others will be introduced over the next three years.

If they work in Southwark, the circles may be launched elsewhere in Britain which, like other countries, is struggling to support a rapidly expanding elderly population at a time when the health care system is faltering, and pensions and savings are dwindling.

When seniors join a local circle, an assessor comes to see them to discuss whether they need help or to learn new skills.

Perhaps they're having difficulty cleaning their home, or their heating is faulty but they're nervous about hiring a plumber.

Maybe their husband or wife died recently, and they'd depended on them to do all of the cooking, gardening, paperwork and to organize their social life.

Or their kids have moved far away, and they'd like to keep in touch but don't know how to open an e-mail account and haven't heard of Skype.

The assessor also finds out what a senior can contribute. Maybe he or she could help fellow members with cooking, odd jobs, using the Internet and writing letters, or could teach them how to do so.

They then work out how best to meet the senior's own needs. Southwark may provide a useful service that the senior didn't know of, or it might be better to seek help from a professional or another member. Circle members can also benefit from discounts on fuel bills and at local cafés, and join group activities like those at fitness clubs, where they might meet new people.

Sounds great, but what does it have to do with design?

The answer is that design played a critical role in researching the needs of Southwark's 25,000 elderly residents as well as in developing the circle concept and selling it to prospective investors and local seniors.

There are several designers in the 15-strong Participle team working alongside social scientists, anthropologists, psychologists, management strategists and economists.

"Designers understand people's motives, aspirations and needs," Cottam said. "They're also natural lateral thinkers, which is critical in projects like this, and their communication skills help to persuade people to participate. Design is only ever one tool in the mix, but it brings something very special."

She and her colleagues at Participle are among the pioneers of one of the most dynamic areas of contemporary design.

It's so new that it's still called by different names, including "social design," "service design" and "the new design," but the universal aim is to use designers' skills to tackle the urgent social problems of our time.

There is a long tradition of designers engaging in humanitarian projects in the developing world. The growing interest in social design (as we'll call it) reflects the determination of European and American designers to crack problems in their own countries at a time when politicians and economists recognize the need to rethink their approach to areas like crime, education, health and aging.

Rather than simply designing buildings, products or literature for use in those fields, social designers are helping to plan and develop the services provided, and the systems that run them.

Originally a social scientist, Cottam, 42, discovered design when working on urban poverty projects for the World Bank in Africa during the mid-1990s.

Huge sums were being invested in new infrastructure, and she realized that the quality of design would determine whether the money was well spent. Cottam also concluded that many projects needed to be more radically redesigned to meet the changing needs of their users.

Returning to Britain in 1996, she realized that the same principle applied there and formed cross-disciplinary teams to develop new design models for schools, prisons and health services.

Two years ago, Cottam founded Participle with the dotcom entrepreneur Hugo Manassei, the innovation strategist Charles Leadbeater, and the industrial designer Colin Burns.

They identify areas where they want to work and outline their strategy, before pitching for funding from public and private sources.

Their first target was aging, and they secured development funding from Southwark and Sky, a subsidiary of Rupert Murdoch's News Corporation. Participle is now working on another aging project in nearby Westminster, and is soon to unveil plans for a youth initiative.

Participle also has lots to do in Southwark before the first two circles go live.

It would like the seniors' families to buy extra services for them, but hasn't worked out how to approach family members, especially as the seniors may be loathe to ask for help.

And Cottam is still puzzling over how to persuade London pensioners to use life coaches to help them to change their lifestyles. "We're convinced that life coaching is a great way of helping them to find a new sense of purpose," she said. "But they're not having any of it. They think it's all too Californian."