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Shaping a Better Future: U-M Researcher Explores How Design Can Help People Live Well Longer

Sheng-Hung Lee's Aug. 9 presentation at the Ann Arbor District Library reimagines longevity through design, technology and community

By Donna Ladipaolo · July 30, 2026

Dr. Sheng-Hung will present "The Future of Longevity: Design, Aging, and Society" at the Ann Arbor District Library's Downtown Branch.

When most people hear the word "longevity," they think about extending life expectancy. Dr. Sheng-Hung Lee hopes to change that conversation.

Instead of asking how people can simply live longer, Lee wants audiences to consider a different question: How can communities help people live better throughout their lives?

Lee, an assistant professor of Urban Technology at the University of Michigan and founder of the d-mix lab, will present "The Future of Longevity: Design, Aging, and Society" on Saturday, Aug. 8, from 5 to 6:30 p.m. at the Ann Arbor District Library's Downtown Branch, 4th Floor Program Room. The free public presentation will introduce his Design for Longevity (DAL) Unstock Framework—an interdisciplinary approach that integrates design, technology, healthcare, public policy, and community planning to improve quality of life across the lifespan.

Rather than focusing solely on aging or healthcare, Lee's work examines how design, service, homes, neighborhoods, transportation systems, public spaces and emerging technologies can work together to help people thrive.

"My path to Design for Longevity (DAL) wasn't shaped by a single 'aha' moment," Lee said. "Rather, it emerged through experiences spanning industrial design at IDEO, systems engineering at MIT, and service innovation across a range of interdisciplinary projects."

That journey eventually led him to the MIT AgeLab, where his perspective shifted dramatically.

"When I joined the MIT AgeLab, I realized that longevity is not simply an issue for older adults—it is one of the defining design challenges of the twenty-first century," he said. "Longer lives reshape how we think about homes, cities, transportation, healthcare, finance, education, work, risk, community and many other social infrastructures."

Looking beyond lifespan

Lee is careful not to define longevity simply as the number of years a person lives.

"I actually try not to reduce longevity to a single definition because it means different things to different people," he said. "For me, longevity is less about adding years to life and more about adding life to those years."

That philosophy forms the foundation of Design for Longevity (DAL).

"Longevity is about designing the conditions that allow people to live healthier, more meaningful, and more connected lives over time," Lee explained. "So rather than asking, 'How can we live longer?' I think we should ask, 'How can we live well for longer?'"

His approach extends well beyond medicine. While advances in healthcare have increased life expectancy, Lee believes future gains in well-being will depend just as much on thoughtful community design.

A community effort

Lee's research blends service design, systems thinking and technology; but he emphasizes that no single discipline holds the answer.

"The challenges of healthy aging are complex and systemic, spanning healthcare, housing, transportation, education, public policy and community life," he said. "No single designer, organization or technology can solve these challenges alone."

Instead, he envisions collaboration among designers, engineers, healthcare professionals, policymakers, businesses, nonprofit organizations and residents.

A simple example illustrates the point.

Helping an older adult maintain access to nutritious food isn't merely about designing a better container for meals, Lee noted. It also involves transportation, neighborhood infrastructure, digital services, volunteers and community organizations working together.

"Ultimately, my goal is not to promote one discipline over another," he said, "but to demonstrate how these perspectives can work together to create more inclusive, resilient, and longevity-friendly communities where people of all generations can thrive."

An Ann Arbor perspective

Although new to the University of Michigan, Lee already has ideas for improving Ann Arbor.

If given the opportunity to redesign one aspect of the city, he would focus on strengthening the connection between the university's Central and North campuses—not simply to move people more efficiently, but to encourage walking and community engagement.

"My goal is not to make transportation more efficient, but to make it more accessible, enjoyable, and walkable," he said.

Inspired by urban planner Jeff Speck's *Walkable City*, Lee believes walking offers benefits that extend far beyond transportation.

"In the context of healthy aging, walking is not only a mode of transportation but also an opportunity to promote physical activity, social interaction, and a stronger sense of place," he said.

Rethinking "aging in place"

Lee also challenges one of the most common concepts in aging research.

While many advocates promote "aging in place"—remaining in one's home as long as possible—Lee prefers what he calls "Aging in a Good Place."

"The question is not only whether people can remain in the same home," he said, "but whether they are living in a place where they genuinely feel comfortable, connected and able to thrive."

For Lee, successful aging isn't defined by independence alone.

"I also think that our emphasis on independence can sometimes overshadow the importance of community," he said. "Healthy aging should balance independence in one's personal living space with interdependence in the surrounding community."

Technology with a human touch

Artificial intelligence (AI), wearable devices, and smart homes are transforming daily life, but Lee urges caution against viewing technology as a cure-all.

"I often describe myself as an AI immigrant rather than an AI resident," he said, noting that younger generations are growing up with intelligent technologies seamlessly integrated into everyday life.

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While AI and digital health tools have enormous promise, Lee believes they should strengthen human relationships rather than replace them.

"Technology alone is not the answer," he said. "AI, smart homes, wearable devices and digital health tools have tremendous potential, but they should be integrated with innovations in healthcare, education, urban design, transportation and community services."

Adding, "Good design should ensure that technology remains accessible, trustworthy and human-centered, empowering people rather than replacing meaningful human relationships and community connections."

Libraries as part of healthy aging

The setting for Lee's talk—the Ann Arbor District Library—is fitting.

He believes libraries, parks, neighborhood organizations and public spaces all contribute to what researchers call the "urban exposome," the environmental conditions that influence health throughout life.

"I like to compare human health to a plant," Lee said. "Genetics provide the seed, but the environment determines how well it grows."

"Our communities act as the 'soil' for healthy aging," he continued. "Well-designed public spaces, welcoming libraries, active neighborhood organizations and supportive social networks provide the conditions that help people flourish throughout their lives."

Designing tomorrow

Lee hopes attendees leave with a new understanding that longevity is something people actively shape every day.

"I hope people leave realizing that longevity isn't something that happens to us—it is something we can actively design and shape," he said.

He encourages everyone to begin with one simple conversation.

"If I could suggest one action for tomorrow, it would simply be to start one conversation about your future," he said. "Talk with a parent, a friend, or even yourself about what kind of life you hope to have in 20 or 30 years."

His ultimate message is both practical and optimistic.

"The future isn't something we simply inherit—it is something we design together," Lee said. "Every conversation, every neighborhood, and every small decision is an opportunity to create a healthier, more meaningful future for us and for the next generation."

For Ann Arbor residents interested in the future of aging, cities, technology and community, Lee's presentation offers an opportunity to rethink longevity—not as a medical challenge alone, but as a design challenge that belongs to everyone.

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Donna Marie Ladipaolo is a writer, journalist, and State of Michigan certified teacher, since 1990. She has written for national publications like The Village Voice, Ear Magazine of New Music, Insurance & Technology, and TheStreet. She is now writing locally for many publications, including Current Magazine, Ann Arbor Family, and the Ann Arbor Independent. Her undergraduate degree is from the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, where, graduated with honors bachelor's degree and three teacher certificate majors: mathematics, social sciences, English. She also earned three graduate degrees in Master of Science, Master of Arts, and Education Specialist Degree.

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