

An interview with Mr. Mark Feng, DESIGN ODYSSEY. SUTD-MIT International Design Centre; Project on Wheel-U

Wheel-U is a passion project turned into a social enterprise idea aiming to bring greater independence to the wheelchair community in Singapore, by reducing their reliance on wheelchair friendly facilities in public. Throughout the city, wheelchair facilities exist, but are not always readily available, which reduce a wheelchair user's ability to carry out day-to-day activities. While the wheelchair is an indispensable equipment to this community, it has the potential to provide much greater support to the user.



1. What inspired this project, and how did you identify this opportunity for contributing to social sustainability?

Wheel-U was inspired by our participation in a social innovation programme held in our university, SUTD by Design Odyssey - our school's very own social innovation club for students. This programme was called DRIVE, and we were encouraged to pursue projects in themes such as the Environment, the Elderly and Healthcare.

Through the DRIVE programme, our team had volunteered at THK Nursing Home and interacted with the elderly there, most of whom were on wheelchairs, which inspired us to create

wheelchair assistive devices for them. Later on, we were given an opportunity to collaborate with national paralympian Mr Jason Chee for our project, so we thought - why not go further? We are incredibly thankful for Mr Chee's help and support in guiding our project, and allowing us to understand our target user's pain points and needs. To us, Wheel-U is not about the results we've achieved, but instead the humbling, heartening and meaningful process of creating a sustainable solution for our friends in the community.

2. How do you think your project has developed the love that locals have for Singapore?

Our project hopes to promote inclusivity amongst Singaporeans. By developing assistive devices for wheelchair users, it enables them to become more independent in their daily activities. This bridges the gap between wheelchair users and the physically abled, since wheelchair users can now feel more assured carrying out everyday activities, allowing them to be more self-reliant. We believe this project develops the love that locals have for Singapore by promoting a more thoughtful and supportive community for the wheelchair users. Through developing these assistive devices, we hope to encourage the community to not only acknowledge, but show more care and concern for the wheelchair users and differently abled individuals around us, to build a more inclusive environment for all.

3. How did you find out about COLA and what attracted you to apply for it?

We were encouraged to apply by our kind programme directors at Design Odyssey, who really believed in our project. When we searched up more on the award itself, we were appealed by how much it aligned with our project's aim to provide equal opportunities to wheelchair users and improve their quality of life, which ultimately led us to taking the leap and applying for the award. We are very grateful to the team at COLA for acknowledging our efforts and for the opportunity to inspire other like-minded individuals to start showing a little more love for their community!

4. What advice would you offer to potential applicants who are keen to start

Usage of U-Table



Adjustable Height



Reading and using laptop



Eating

their projects?

Starting out on new projects may appear daunting at first—perhaps not knowing where to start, or where you would go with the ideas in your mind. But if we had to give advice to anyone who is interested in embarking on a new project, we believe that the greatest advice would be to not be afraid of failure, and to believe in the process, not the result.

While it may sound cliché, when our team first started out, we were also often hesitant and worried about the success of our project. We had experienced our fair share of failures and hardships, be it in physical prototyping or testing our prototypes with Mr Jason Chee, but it was through these experiences that we came to truly appreciate the growth we had from trying over and over again. Even now, we continue to learn and improve on our ideas - we still make mistakes in prototyping but what matters is that we've gotten past our initial fear of failure and persevere in working towards perfecting our final product!

Through interacting with Mr Jason Chee, we have also gained many meaningful insights after each prototype testing session with him,

and got to know him better as a person as well. We believe our project is not about creating the best wheelchair assistive device, but is instead about taking proactive steps towards understanding and seeking to meet the needs of this community. It is this belief in helping the wheelchair users community that continues to motivate us today, rather than the success of our prototypes.

So if you're thinking of starting a new project, don't be afraid to fail! Only through failing will you get to really grow and get better at what you do. You will find that the greatest motivation comes from finding meaning in your work.

5. What would be the next area you would like to be part of transforming in Singapore to make it a more lovable city?

While studying in university, we realise many students face difficulties coping with their school work, and subsequently developing negative thoughts and feelings of depression. However, although our current society still largely treats mental health as a taboo topic, there has been much improvement over the years in this space. Thus, the next area we would possibly like to look at is in normalising awareness and importance in taking care of our own mental health, especially amongst students who may have difficulties coping with the stressful education system in Singapore. With more emphasis placed on improving and caring for our own, as well as others' emotional, psychological and social well-being, we hope that can be the next step in making Singapore a more loveable city.



An interview with Ms. Nirit Ellenbogen Team Lead of Project Mad in Singapore & North Bridge Road; won the Distinguished awards by Nanyang Polytechnic School of Design & Architecture

1. This project expanded opportunities for more people. What inspired this project, and how did you appeal to design students to participate?

MAD in Singapore students' summit was initiated and conceived from the objective to engage design students from different levels of education, and to invite them to experience how Social Innovative Design Actions, can be initiated and implemented by ground up activities and by students, and how these initiatives can create positive impact at selected public spaces in Singapore.

Another objective was to bring students, industry experts and stake holders from the various communities, together, to get to know each other, to work together, and to witness the power of collaboration. As the main objective was to let the students experience SELF INITIATIVE, we aimed to motivate them, by the opportunity to receive grants to implement the projects they would conceive instead by the common award of grades or other rewards.

As educators, we realized that design students would appreciate the opportunity to initiate real life projects and even receive grants, if being successful, in order to execute them, as this is not a common opportunity for them, in most design schools.



We decided to facilitate this to happen with a 3 days summit, and students were also motivated by the opportunity to meet and collaborate with each other, with industry experts and to be inspired by key industry leaders as speakers.

We learnt that students appreciate competitions, but this competition was different, as instead of the usual few prizes to be won, we decided not to limit the amount of awards, and the only condition to win, was to produce an appealing design proposal. We believe that this principle assisted in motivating the students to participate, and also contributed greatly to foster a true collaboration spirit during the 3 days design incubator.

2. How do you think your project has developed the love that locals have for Singapore?

MAD in Singapore's programme, requested the participants to examine public spaces in Singapore and to identify and explore how these spaces could be better used and to rethink how to reprogramme them and make them more lively and loveable.

We believe that the engagement with a public place, whether as designer or the user, is holding a great capacity to nurture and to enhance our love to Singapore. The community garden at North Bridge Road, is engaging encouraging the residents to engage with their public place and the fact that they have developed ownership for it is a sign of attachment and love.

3. How did you find out about COLA and what attracted you to apply for it?

Nanyang Polytechnic, School of Design, has applied and awarded with COLA awards in the past, and as we appreciate the opportunity to be recognised, it was natural

for us to apply again. We appreciate COLA's values and mission as educators.

4. What advice would you offer to potential applicants who are keen to start their projects?

We would like to advise potential applicants not to be afraid to dream, even if their idea seems impossible or very challenging to achieve. If one believes in his or her good cause, they should have the courage and determination to make that happen.

MAD in Singapore was conceived and made possible with very little resources. We had little budget and had to rely mostly on our own passion, hard work and determination.

As we believed in our good cause, it was not difficult to convince other schools and industry partners, to join and contribute their time, talents and efforts, while the only compensation we could offer was the opportunity to be part of an inspiring social initiative.

5. What would be the next area that you would like to see or be part of transforming in Singapore to make it a more lovable city?

As educators, in the way we teach and operate, we would like to continue to nurture and inspire the young generation to be initiative, to care for the country and society and to see their primary purpose in becoming designers, in making our lives in Singapore, better.

