



CASE STUDY

Singapore | Enabling Village

# A Space for All

To support persons with disabilities in their bid to lead independent and fulfilling lives, Singapore's Ministry of Social and Family Development and SG Enable created the Enabling Village. But instead of creating an exclusive space, they designed and built a village that is open and inclusive to all.

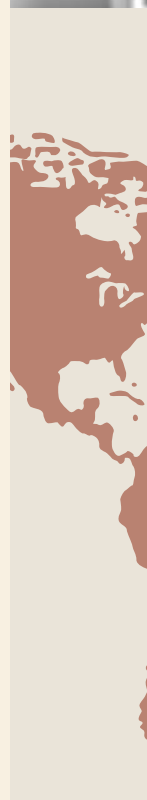
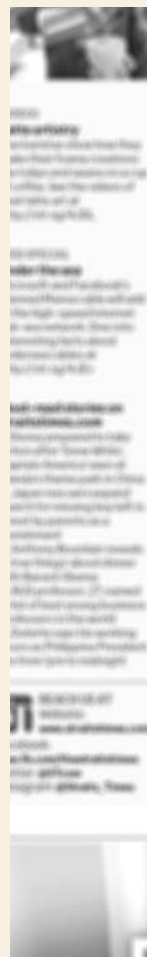
## The Challenge

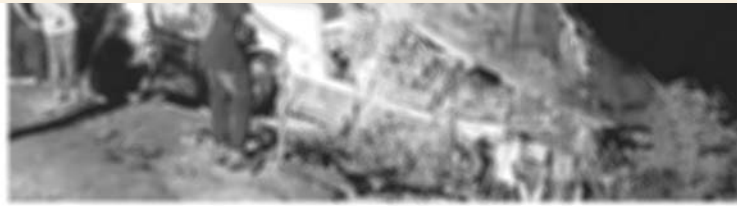
Singapore launched its first Enabling Masterplan in 2007. This is a five-year roadmap that guides the development of policies, programmes, services and other support for persons with disabilities (PWDs). Since then, it has signed the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, and is now drafting the Masterplan's third edition.

These commitments have led to greater inclusion changes. For instance, all new developments must now have "universal design" (UD) features like wider corridors, ramp access or toilets with grab bars. Hearing-impaired students who can sign will also be eligible for mainstream education from 2018. Government funds are available for employers to defray the costs of purchasing equipment such as assistive

technology and adapt the workplace for PWDs.

While there are no national statistics on employment, two organisations that help PWDs find work say they saw an improvement in 2015. Anecdotally however, PWDs still face challenges: difficulty in securing interviews when disabilities are declared; challenges in getting around; being hired for unsuitable jobs; and receiving salaries that are lower than able-bodied colleagues or have stagnated for years. Two recent surveys—*People with Physical Disabilities in Singapore* (Lien Centre for Social Innovation) and "Are Singapore companies ready to hire people with disabilities?" (Spire Research and Consulting)—indicate that more could definitely be done to support PWDs in leading independent lives.





...between the public and such children. For over a third of respondents, such children are not part of their social circle. Only a quarter of parents surveyed report that their children are friends with them. However, the survey also found that Singaporeans' uncertainty about interacting with special needs children falls when the frequency of interactions rises. Given this correlation, Dr Kenneth Poon, a clinical psychologist and researcher, said there should be more opportunities for interaction so that friendships and shared interests can form. He said: "Preschools are a great starting point to seed this process of change."

# S'poreans 'don't walk the talk' on special needs kids

Poll findings show they are tolerant towards, rather than accepting of, these children

Janice Tai

Singaporeans support the idea of inclusion but do not walk the talk, a survey has found.

While most people believe that children with and without disabilities can study together, only half of parents polled are comfortable with having a special needs child sitting next to their own child in class.

Furthermore, only one in 10 Singaporeans is confident of interacting with special needs children.

These were some of the findings of a survey, released yesterday at a press conference, which asked more than 1,000 people for their experiences of inclusion in daily life and early education. The survey

was commissioned by local philanthropic house Lien Foundation.

The findings suggest that Singaporeans are tolerant towards, rather than accepting of, special needs people, said Lien Foundation programme manager Ng Tze Yong.

"Singaporeans embrace the idea of inclusion, but there is a gap between what we think and what we do," he said.

Inclusion means ensuring that everyone, including those with disabilities, is given opportunities to realise his potential in the same environment.

"Building handicapped ramps, parking spaces and toilets is the easy part. We now need to move beyond that to dismantle the obstacles in our minds and the barriers in

our hearts," Mr Ng added.

Asked about the current level of acceptance and degree of social interaction between the public and special needs children, more than half of the respondents said Singaporeans are willing to share public spaces with such children, but not to interact with them.

Only 8 per cent of those polled feel that Singaporeans are willing to go the extra mile to make a special needs child feel welcome.

Yet nearly half of them believe that new laws are needed to promote the rights of such children.

For instance, eight in 10 of them believe it should be compulsory for such children to go to school. They are now exempted from the Compulsory Education Act.

One possible reason why special needs children, such as those with learning and behavioural difficulties or physical disabilities, are not accepted fully in society is the lack

of interaction between the public and such children.

For over a third of respondents, such children are not part of their social circle. Only a quarter of parents surveyed report that their children are friends with them.

However, the survey also found that Singaporeans' uncertainty about interacting with special needs children falls when the frequency of interactions rises.

Given this correlation, Dr Kenneth Poon, a clinical psychologist and researcher, said there should be more opportunities for interaction so that friendships and shared interests can form. He said: "Preschools are a great starting point to seed this process of change."

Mr Tang Hui Nee, assistant director and head of community services at KK Women's and Children's Hospital, said that it would help if there was more public education, and people had more exposure

## Key findings

- 30 per cent agree that Singapore is an inclusive society.
- 64 per cent believe Singaporeans are willing to share public spaces but not interact with the special needs community.
- 50 per cent of parents are comfortable with having a child with special needs sit next to their own child in class.
- 49 per cent believe new laws are necessary to better promote the rights of children with special needs.
- 10 per cent are confident of interacting with children with special needs.

to such children. Three in four respondents said being informed in advance about the special needs of a child will help them be more understanding when disruptive behaviour happens.

To better understand the needs and challenges of the special needs community, a separate survey of 750 parents of children with special needs is being done and the findings will be released next month.

janice@sph.com.sg



The Straits Times report (31 May 2016) on attitudes towards the special needs population.





01

## The Solution

The idea of creating a dedicated space to further support PWDs was mooted in 2013.

Ms Ku Geok Boon, CEO of SG Enable, said: “Our vision was not just to transform the physical environment into one that is accessible to PWDs. More importantly, we wanted to create a focal point of services that puts information, resources, training and employment opportunities within reach of PWDs to enable them to lead independent lives.”

The Enabling Village would also showcase how UD, assistive technology and infocomm technology can enable PWDs to lead more independent lives.

Some of the key services at the Village include an Information and Career

Centre that gives PWDs employment advice and referrals, and a specialised training centre that prepares persons with autism for employment. Other training and job opportunities that are on site include an architectural design studio, F&B outlets, a supermarket, and a retail art gallery, which features works by artists with special needs.

The Village also has an assistive technology resource centre called Tech Able, which comprises a lab that trains PWDs in communications and technology; an experiential room where light and sound are drastically reduced so users can experience challenges faced by persons with sight or hearing loss; and a showroom that enables PWDs to borrow and try assistive tech devices to make informed purchase decisions.

01 The supermarket in the Village has wider aisles that accommodate wheelchair users.

02 The Village has an accessible amphitheater with an uninterrupted ramp.

“SG Enable was conscious of the need to create an inclusive space that would promote integration and interaction among people of all abilities, instead of creating an isolated enclave.”





## 01

SG Enable was conscious of the need to create an inclusive space that would promote integration and interaction among people of all abilities, instead of creating an isolated enclave. So it chose the grounds of a former school, in central Singapore, as the Village site. Conveniently located, the 30,000-square-metre compound is near to a mass rapid transit station, and surrounded by schools, homes, offices and senior activity centres.

Making sure that the entire Village was accessible for all was a key building principle. But this was not easy to achieve given the existing infrastructure and uneven terrain. “Behind a perimeter fence, a huge carpark and driveway separated the buildings from the surroundings ... there were multiple level changes ... between buildings and within buildings,” recalled Mr Phua Hong Wei, Associate of architectural firm WOHA. Spaces had to be extensively redesigned to link every

01 Tech Able showcases the use of assistive technology in a home office environment.

02 The Village hosts programmes like Superhero Me, an initiative that brings less privileged and special needs children into a cross-community for a more inclusive Singapore.



02

building seamlessly and accessibly. All steps and thresholds were replaced with ramps, while lifts were installed. WOHA converted a courtyard with a steep slope into an amphitheatre by overlaying the terrain with a timber terrace. A gentle, uninterrupted ramp now weaves through the amphitheatre, allowing wheelchair users to navigate the slope easily.

Amenities have been designed to be inclusive too. For instance, event spaces, as well as the gym, are equipped with a “hearing induction loop” system, which transmits signals directly to hearing aids. Key signage such as toilet doors and staircase handrails have Braille lettering to help blind users move about independently.



01

## The Outcome

Even before the Village was built, SG Enable and its partners had already been offering training and employment to PWDs. But now, the physical premises have brought SG Enable's more than 20 private and public partners and their services under one roof. This means that PWDs seeking information and resources, such as grants, no longer have to travel to disparate locations. Deaf photographer Isabelle Lim says: "It's like a one-stop centre for persons with special needs."

Mr Timothy Ang manages BIM Studio, a non-profit architectural design and training studio for PWDs. He says the Village's location is a boon for PWDs who often decline training or employment due to inaccessibility. PWDs using motorised wheelchairs can reach the train station

in 15 minutes, via an unobstructed and sheltered pathway. SG Enable also has a free shuttle service to and from the station, which encourages trainees to attend BIM's classes, as well as those conducted by other providers.

True to its original intention, the Village's lush gardens, ponds, gazebos and activity spaces are now enjoyed by the public. Sheltered linkways to the train station and wet market encourage the public to walk through the Village, promoting integration and interaction.

With its mix of inclusive facilities such as the supermarket, pre-school and fitness centre, as well as special events like weekend markets, the Village is slowly but surely becoming a space for all. ○

01 Family and ability-friendly public events are frequently held at the Village.

02 Mr Ang demonstrates how to use software in his BIM Studio.

03 Participants (some in wheelchairs) of the Australia-based Enabled Futures immersion programme tour the Village.





02



03