

## Section Two

## Home &amp; Family

# When the do-it-yourself bug bites

Four do-it-yourself enthusiasts tell **MAY HO** why they're addicted to making anything from boats to toys

## WHY do it yourself when you can buy?

You can get almost anything if you look hard enough. And if it isn't there, you could always have it made to order if money were no object.

But try telling this to die-hard D-I-Yers who'd do everything themselves "if only time permitted". Although there aren't many D-I-Yers around, Singapore does not lack handymen and women who can do more than change a light bulb or a blown fuse.

Sales at Hands, Singapore's complete D-I-Y store which opened recently, have been "encouraging", especially on weekends. As expected, the best sellers were tools and hardware. Gardening equipment and plants were next. Shelves and lumber were also popular, said Mr Tan Wee Gee, its managing director.

"We had many people coming to us with their plans and drawings, and asking for advice. Most were doing shelvings and bits of furniture to fit their homes. Many were young to middle-aged professionals with a fair mix of men and women," he said.

According to him, D-I-Yers were once looked down upon as "consumers who can't afford to buy". But D-I-Y is now a case of one-upmanship in a consumer-oriented society, where buying is the norm.

Four D-I-Yers I interviewed gave their reasons for preferring their own work as "not being able to get what I want from the shops", "enjoying the pleasure, satisfaction and thrill" from having created something themselves, and "wanting something unique".

## Cost saving

Cost saving was another factor. Most began as children with "very little money to spend on toys" and, thus, had to make their own. What they made ranged from simple kites, catapults and bamboo rafts to cherry pop guns, soap box carts to rowboats. All that was needed was "a little talent, some creativity and lots of interest" in seeing a project through.

Success is catching. The first clumsy attempt gives a sense of accomplishment. Subsequent attempts are more successful, resulting in more ambitious projects.

In the case of Stephen Seow, 52, D-I-Y activities led to the establishment of an engineering business. Today, his company, Dynamics Engineering, with a turnover of "a few million dollars", employs a staff of 40.

Like many D-I-Yers, Stephen began by inventing his own amusements. The young Stephen made wooden boats which he launched in monsoon drains near his Tank Road home after every shower of rain.

Later, inspired by the Popular Mechanics and Popular Science magazines which he borrowed from a friend's father, he made simple shelves, cabinets and other furniture. He collected scrap

timber or pinewood cases discarded by shops.

At 13, he designed a wooden two-seater rowboat for a stay at a Tanjong Rhu bungalow. Working after school and "24 hours on Saturdays", he finished it in three months. "It was still in good shape after a week's use and we left it there," he recalled.

The second boat he built, at 15, was a canoe made with "wood and 10 to 12 layers of brown paper which I made waterproof with waterproof glue". By then, he was the top student at the Balestier Junior Trade School.

He later rejoined the school as an instructor three years after completing his studies in automotive engineering, and then joined Cycle and Carriage as plant manager soon after.

## Always broke

Stephen remembered being "always broke" because his savings went into engines for radio-controlled aero-models, model power boats, go-karts and even a sports car.

He took part in and won go-kart races and his SS Special, the sports car which he built from scrap and aluminium, made several appearances in the Grand Prix in the 1960s.

But it was his involvement in model power boats and his introduction to fibreglass that led to his setting up shop. A fibreglass shop he frequent-

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Stephen Seow ... fascinated with engines, he works on his boat during weekends



Benjamin Tan ... mounting the horns which his aunt found in a farm in Sabah. He made the fishing rods as well as the lures.

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