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SPOTLIGHT / DESIGNING THE FUTURE

## A future by design

**If these creatives have their way, the Singapore of tomorrow will be defined by care, human connection and a little bit of magic.**

*Writer: Low Shi Ping*

How can the Marvel Universe shape the liveability and lovability of Singapore?

At first glance, the two are as different as day and night, but listen to Welby Altidor and it is easy to be convinced that there is causality.

Welby is the Group Chief Creative Officer at Cityneon Holdings, an entertainment company that creates large-scale, immersive experiences for people to enjoy.

Of note are the licensing rights it owns to stage exhibitions with partners such as Marvel, The Walt Disney Company and Hasbro.

For instance, it created the Marvel Avengers S.T.A.T.I.O.N<sup>1</sup>, where visitors get to interact with popular characters like Iron Man and Thor, as they “train” to become a S.T.A.T.I.O.N. agent.



Image credit: Cityneon



“One of the most important elements of a thriving city is to have citizens who are inspired, and at the heart of that is a connection with beauty,” explains Welby.

“We create spaces where people can experience a little bit of beauty and be inspired by it in one way or another.” While the definition of beauty is broad and subjective, he feels that fundamentally, it promotes harmony, inclusion and care.

These thoughts are echoed too by Lekshmy Parameswaran, Co-Founder of service design practice, The Care Lab.

“An element that is important for me to feel connected to a city is that there are spaces and ways to nurture the soul,” she shares.

Based in Barcelona, Spain, she is unfortunately too far from any Marvel Avengers S.T.A.T.I.O.N. exhibition but substitutes it with day trips to the nearby natural reserves and beaches.

“It is an incredible experience to be able to find environments within the city to escape the noise and connect with nature.”

### **Nurturing caring neighbourhoods**

It does not stop there; Lekshmy points towards the need to have socially sustainable urban planning and design to increase a city’s liveability and lovability.

Just over five years ago, Barcelona pioneered the concept of a “Superblock”; an urban mobility strategy creating city blocks around which traffic was rerouted and green spaces were included as a means of reducing air and noise pollution, while increasing life expectancy and cleanliness.

A collaborator of The Care Lab, the city council’s Social Rights team also started to integrate social services and create the notion of a “Social Superblock” to enable care teams to deliver support more effectively within a neighbourhood.

“This idea of fair access to services is something that I think is very important. When you see that a city cares for everyone, you want to care back, so it builds a kind of solidarity that I think leads to liveability and lovability.”

On a more tangible note, this means, for example, having childcare or primary healthcare facilities within a 15-minute walkable radius.

It is also about nurturing relationships between people, which is an aspect she feels needs more attention, especially since there are gaps to be plugged.

Lekshmy illustrates how Radars<sup>2</sup>, a community-initiated programme promoted by the city council to target unwanted loneliness among the elderly, is a good example.

“What it does is it looks, on a neighbourhood scale, at the different touch points and services that already exist; in Singapore, it would be the kopitiam that the elderly visit daily.

“The project then engages shop owners and people working in these places to become radars or early detectors of changes in elderly routines.

“They are trained to raise a red flag and connect to social care services and a team of local neighbourhood volunteers who take on this role of befriending.”

She reveals that such social innovation projects are being developed in Jurong in Singapore, with the involvement of the Ministry of Health Office for Healthcare Transformation, whom she hosted some years ago in Barcelona to introduce them to Radars and the Superblocks strategy.

“It is a participatory process; it's about listening and learning what each community actually is ready and wanting to do and letting them drive the design process. Community engagement as a mechanism of creating solutions is essential.”

In fact, this is not the only connection that The Care Lab has to Singapore.

It is currently working on a new model of palliative care with HCA Hospice Care, the Lien Foundation and Lekker Architects; where HCA’s day-care service experience for launch in a new day hospice - Oasis@Outram - located within the new Outram Community Hospital<sup>3</sup>.





*A visioning workshop by The Care Lab with the HCA Hospice Care's frontline and management staff, volunteer programme partners and Lekker Architects, to envision the new **Oasia@Outram** service. Image credit: The Care Lab/fuelfor, with permission from Lien Foundation and HCA Hospice. The photo was taken prior to COVID-19*

“It really is a first for Singapore and uplifts what is available in terms of care for people at the end of life,” she explains.

“It repositions that whole experience from being something that we dread to think we, or any of our loved ones, may end up in, to one that nurtures growth, even at the end of life.”

### **Designing magical moments**

There are other ways to demonstrate care for people too.

Even as he designs exhibition experiences, Welby is mindful that he leads a team that needs to be moved and inspired too.

“How do you create amazing work, amazingly, is really fundamental to the way I try to work every day,” he explains.

To him, everything starts with the fundamental notion of caring for people around him; as a creative leader at work, it is about bringing out his team’s abilities and potential to be their best.

His primary goal, at the moment, is to develop Big Lab, the innovation driver at CityNeon he established, focused on shaping the future of immersive entertainment.

To do this, he has been tasked to identify and build a community of creative collaborators from around the world.

Together, they strive towards creating experiences that are highly personalised, memorable, interactive and, most importantly, collectively fun.



*A conceptualisation of an original Big Lab IP of Cityneon, showcasing Big Lab's vision of a future garden city. The team behind this vision is led by Welby Altidor. Image credit: Cityneon*



“We are really aware that people are looking to accumulate, share and spend social capital on all kinds of platforms.

“In a way, our own entertainment platforms are essentially their broadcast place, allowing people to accumulate some of that social capital.”

Welby feels that the outlook for his industry is an increase in the need for “proximity entertainment”, or opportunities for visitors to drop in somewhere near home to a different world to escape.

When they do, he hopes they feel that they are entering a space where they are treated “extraordinarily well” and “feel good”.

Even as they immerse in the technology and storytelling, he wants them to feel like walls are coming down.

“We think that from a social standpoint, there is an incredible value in creating a few moments of magic, fun and entertainment that bring people just a little bit closer together.”

### **Designing a better normal**

Yet, as the COVID-19 pandemic is still ongoing, that closeness cannot be manifested physically.

It points to how a new normal is needed, and designers should play an important role in defining that, especially when it comes to urban design.

This means shifting the focus to reflection and re-examining purpose. “I know everybody is navel gazing but this idea of finding what it is that you want to contribute is the question that we have to ask.

“There is a tonne of work to be done. Systems have fallen apart that have to be rebuilt. We must have a clear sense of who we are and what we want to achieve,” says Lekshmy.

Part of that reinvention is to reframe the thought process around how to serve people and communities.



*A strategic planning toolkit co-created in 2016 by The Care Lab with Apex Harmony Lodge, in support of their person-centric model of dementia care. Image credit: The Care Lab/fuelfor, with permission from Apex Harmony Lodge*

Lekshmy adds: “It is about designing solutions and strategies, whether they be toolkits or campaigns, interiors or service experiences, policies or programmes that have those qualities that reflect the social value that we collectively need to bring forth.”



Chan Soo Khian, Founding Principal and Design Director of multidisciplinary firm SCDA feels that architects are also adept at doing this.

“We have the ability to understand and synthesise larger issues, bring them together and offer advice on how to solve them.”

He offers some practical tips by way of generous landscaping in buildings. “I would like to see more sky terraces and the allowance for bigger balconies so Singapore can truly be a green tropical city in the sky.”

He is desirous of a more differentiated sense of neighbourhood within the country, which would celebrate cultural diversity and promote a stronger identity of Singapore’s melting pot heritage.

Welby agrees that going “back to normal” is not an option but instead, is preoccupied with discovering what is a “better normal”.

“How do you bring more beauty to the world?” he asks.

“How do we go beyond being mesmerised by the technicality of technology?”

“How do we bring that mindset of innovation towards experiences that are including more and caring for more people?”

He wonders out loud about being inspired to design an event that brings together the beauty of music and the power of video to showcase the unique elements of Singapore within a public space in a safe manner.

“Often in my trade, I say constraint is the mother of creativity. I want to bring people together from different horizons, break open the box and create an unexpected spark,” he muses.

“What if we were to bring music in the middle of a housing estate and suddenly its visual expression could take over and offer a moment of magic to a large number of people?”

And don’t be surprised if in the middle of it all, Iron Man or Thor pops up, because we know our city could do with some tender loving superhero care too.

*Welby Altidor, Lekshmy Parameswaran and Chan Soo Khian are part of the President’s Design Award’s 2020 Jury Panel.*

**About the President’s Design Award** ([pda.designsingapore.org](http://pda.designsingapore.org))

The award is Singapore’s highest honour for designers and designs across all disciplines and it is administered by the DesignSingapore Council and URA. Lekshmy together with The Care Lab Co-founder, László Herczeg and the National Council of Social Service Singapore, was also awarded the Design of the Year in 2018 for their design strategies to transform the future of caregiving in Singapore.

Top image: image credit: Cityneon

<sup>1</sup> *The Avengers S.T.A.T.I.O.N (Scientific Training and Tactical intelligence Operative Network) was an immersive travelling exhibition that was presented at the Singapore Science Centre from 2016 to 2017 taking visitors on an action-filled journey into the Marvel cinematic universe.*

<sup>2</sup> *Radars is a community-driven programme promoted by the Barcelona City Council from 2008 together with networks that consist of neighbours, shops, pharmacies and other groups within neighbourhoods to reduce the risks of isolation and social exclusion among the elderly and to make neighbourhoods a safe and friendly space for them.*

<sup>3</sup> *The Outram Community Hospital is located beside the Singapore General Hospital, with 500 of its beds earmarked for general rehabilitation and sub-acute patients. The remaining is allocated to palliative care patients. The hospital focus on optimising patients’ recovery through rehabilitation, even as they receive inpatient care. This is integrated into the structure of the hospital, with rooms for practising rehabilitative exercises joined to the wards, and facilities that help with developing patients’ abilities.*

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