

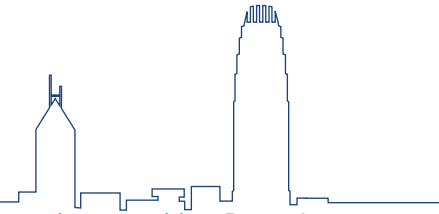


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AN ARCHITECT OF DREAMS

PETER WOO

CHAIRMAN
THE WHARF HOLDINGS LTD

**SPECIAL
SUPPLEMENT:
PREMIUM SERVICES &
PRODUCTS**

Peter Woo

AN ARCHITECT OF DREAMS

Despite being in a city of tremendous economic development, less than 20 percent of local students have the opportunity to study in a Hong Kong university or enroll in tertiary education – a predicament among many of Hong Kong’s younger generation. Recognizing the need to care for the less-privileged, Peter Woo, Chairman of The Wharf Holdings Ltd, stands to make a difference as the architect of an open platform called Project WeCan, designed to support students of all backgrounds in creating and reaching their dreams

By Blessing Waung

In a city known for its nearly impossible academic rigor, it's hard to imagine that a bulk of the students in Hong Kong will not even go onto study beyond the high school level. Indeed, with ubiquitous reports of insufficient international school placements and intense pressure at prestigious local schools, there is a surprising number of students who are falling behind.

It is a trajectory that Peter Woo is attempting to change for the future of Hong Kong.

Woo, who didn't give media interviews for 15 years, has recently been popping up on newspaper and magazine covers once more to speak about something he believes is worth talking about: educating the next generation of Hong Kong. The smiling, notoriously fit chairman of The Wharf Holdings Ltd is quite happy to do interviews these days, because he's excited to talk about his newest endeavor: Project WeCan. Though he has already made headway, he believes it's time to speed things up.

In 2011, Woo was still at the helm of Wheelock and Wharf Group, but his mind was spinning on ways to give back to the community. During that introspective period, he found out a surprising fact. Approximately 18 percent of local Hong Kong secondary students are able to further their studies in Hong Kong. The other 82 percent, though, are the ones Woo is focusing upon. Many of them will not go on to study in a Hong Kong university or enroll in tertiary education.

Bridging a gap

Hence, the idea for Project WeCan was born. Designed to help a specific subset of Hong Kong secondary school students in what are known as "Band 3" schools, the program is a multi-platform, alternate support system for the current education system, providing additional help that the schools otherwise might not receive from their government funding alone.

"What are the chances of these kids compared to a kid from a much more



affluent family?" Woo asks. "It's unfair competition. The government education policy is very fair: it says every school will have the same resources. But my point is that for Band 3 schools, it's not fair. How do we level the playing field? That's what we're trying to do."

Together, the project is threefold. The area that Wharf and its business units have been committed to are providing the financial resources for schools to develop, as well as to give exciting experiences and exposures to students that they otherwise would not receive.

"Some of them have never visited Central. Many of them have never

visited a hotel. They came to Central, and they asked whether they had to pay admission to go to a shopping center," Woo recalls. "For people who are living in the Mid-Levels and working in Central, they may not understand there's another world out there totally different from the world you're used to. You'd be surprised it exists in Hong Kong."

Many of the Band 3 schools are located in neighborhoods far away from the countless skyscrapers of Central, in places such as Sheung Shui and Tuen Mun. According to Project WeCan's research, many of the students come from underprivileged backgrounds such as single-parent

families, recent immigrants, those on Comprehensive Social Security Assistance, or all of the above.

Many of these students don't find the relevance that of their education to their futures, Woo believes, and slog away in the classroom without a clear sense of motivation. This is exactly where the program is meant to supplement their normal education, to provide them with goals to work towards.

The core mission

Garmen Chan, a long-time employee of Wharf and former executive director at the West Kowloon

Cultural District Authority, calls Woo "the great architect" of the project. When he was told that only 18 percent of secondary school students in Hong Kong end up matriculating in a university or other form of tertiary education, Woo wanted to know what happened to those left behind.

"We're not educators. We don't claim to be," Woo says.

To find that software pool, the Project WeCan team discovered the Quality School Improvement Project at The Chinese University of Hong Kong, with a track record of supporting schools in their development by enhancing teaching and learning effectiveness over the past 15 years.

The program also collaborates with The City University of Hong Kong, as well as The Polytechnic University of Hong Kong (PolyU) through the university's Office of Service Learning. Woo was the Chairman of the Council of the latter for the better part of the 90s.

With these universities providing support, the goals of Project WeCan are to elevate the skills necessary for students to be competitive in the marketplace.

"We hope that through this program the school will help the student find something that they are good at and try to motivate them, inspire them, so that when they finish at 18, they have self-confidence," Woo says. "They will think, 'I know math, I know the Chinese I need, I know some English – the basic competence and communication skills.'"

A window to the world

Project WeCan is additionally about human resources development, not just confined to the classic, textbook education, Woo says. Some of the opportunities provided are priceless, such as the popular "Summer Job Tasting" program, where students are allowed to participate in internship-like programs across Wharf's group companies such as Marco Polo Hotels and Wharf T&T, and business network. Students receive exposure

that even university-level students would wish to apply for.

At the school taken under Lane Crawford's wing, a group of ecstatic Form 2 students had the chance to put on a real-life fashion show that was completely integrated with their English curriculum. There is much room for creativity, as the programs are conceived by the companies and students working together.

Students of a few other Project WeCan schools had the chance to visit with the world-famous gigantic Rubber Duck while it was docked in Victoria Harbour, which was initially invited by Harbour City to bring joy to Hong Kong residents and tourists alike.

There are opportunities, too, that are once in a lifetime for them. For example, Chief Executive of Hong Kong CY Leung hosted Project WeCan students in the Government House for an afternoon talk, where he spoke to them about their hopes for the future.

Indeed, senior government officials such as Chief Secretary Carrie Lam and Financial Secretary John Tsang have been enthusiastic about Project WeCan's benefit to Hong Kong society, but Woo is quick to emphasize that the program is apolitical.

More than financial support

Hong Kong has a long-standing, acknowledged culture of "cheque-book philanthropy," however, Woo and his colleagues came up with the idea of "Business-in-Community" meant to add to this, in order for companies that not only help financially but also with their time and human capital knowledge. "We give money to an NGO and then we have met our conscience. I think with an added element of care, it's a business in community project, not just business donating."

Already within his own vast company, Woo has seen a change in his employees. Though Project WeCan perhaps started as a company initiative, eventually each business unit has turned it into their own unique undertaking.

“It’s our staff that became the surprise bonus. They were so enthusiastic and energetic, feeling like they are doing something meaningful,” Woo says. “They took ownership and accountability. The smiles on the children’s faces make their day. Some of our staff would say, ‘I don’t want to go work for another company because I don’t have the same opportunity at another company.’ This opportunity is not directly work-related, it’s extracurricular.”

“Internally, our team spirit and sense of belonging has increased,” says Agnes Hui, Senior Manager of Group Corporate Communications at Wharf. “It’s not an ad hoc, one-off program. There is longevity in volunteerism, and we see really long-term results.”

At a November teacher training at the HHCKLA Buddhist Ching Kok Secondary School in Tiu Keng Leng, close to 500 teachers gathered in the auditorium on an early Friday morning. The energy in the room was palpable, as they gathered to discuss ways to improve the school and best practices in teaching.

Ricky Wong, Managing Director of Wheelock Properties, stood before the crowd of teachers and enthusiastically detailed the progress he has seen in Project WeCan over the past few years. Throughout the course of his speech, he used the word “hope” in Cantonese more than a dozen times, a resounding theme for the project in schools where students don’t seem to have many of their own.

Teacher Development Days are where teachers and volunteers can come together and share best practices about what has been successful for them in the past and how better to motivate students towards learning.

A community partnership

Now that the project has already gotten off the ground successfully, Woo believes it’s now not only in the hands of the Wharf subsidiaries who have been working with schools, but also for other companies in Hong Kong



to take the reins and help the schools sans beneficiaries.

“We’re not trying to say the school system is no good. We’re here to help, we’re here to supplement. We don’t want to be in anyone’s way, and we’re not building turf. This is a partnership situation,” Woo emphasizes.

“I don’t look at it as a Wharf proprietary project,” Woo says. “Any company that joins, it’s your program. You can ask us for advice on the software and in terms of how we do it – come visit the schools we do, but it’s your company own flag. It’s your own company’s brand.”

There is so much opportunity to give back to Hong Kong through Project WeCan, Woo postulates, and in a large sense, education will close the loop and wind up benefiting companies as well. Oftentimes companies lack a skilled labor force and the project bridges the gap to connect students to a better future and companies to a prepared workforce.

“We’ve now gone to what we call the second stage. I was totally blown away by the enthusiasm I saw at a teachers’ training,” Woo says. “I’m already 68 years old. If we add four schools every year, nothing is going to happen. Let’s

go to the next phase. Why don’t we double it? From November of last year until August of this year, our team worked very hard to come out with taking on 30 more schools.”

As of September of this year, the intake included these 30 schools with a funding budget of HK\$500,000 per school per year, for five school years.

“We don’t claim any territory, because it’s not for us,” he says. “We just want to make sure things are done. There are 150 schools in Band 3, and so far there are 44, about a third of them [Project WeCan schools]. There’s still a lot of room.”

There has already been a “quantum jump” after just three short years from the initial 14 schools to 44 schools, altogether benefiting about 40,000 students. Eventually, one of Project WeCan’s ultimate vision goals is to eliminate Band 3 completely by raising the bottom line of schools in Hong Kong.

An honorable undertaking

In local Hong Kong newspaper *The Standard*, the headline was “Yes He Can,” referring to the obvious association



that the chairman has. Though it is something he wants to champion, he doesn’t want it to seem that it’s just him: everyone who touches the project takes ownership for the students.

“I don’t have a school of my own,” he laughs. “That might be rather unfair, to be the chairman’s school, don’t you think?”

So far, in addition to Wharf Holdings subsidiaries, companies such as AIA, Coach, and the Standard Chartered 150th Anniversary Community Foundation have signed up to sponsor schools. Additionally, the French Consulate has signed up to take on one of the schools.

For interested parties, Project WeCan has an invitation for applicant schools, which is a matchmaking process to see if the chemistry clicks between the company and the school. Woo believes that in addition to local Hong Kong companies, multinational companies – especially American companies – have much to offer to these students.

“Americans always cheer for the underdog. Here they are,” Woo says. “If you want to do something for Hong Kong, for the community, this is a live option. For your staff, give them a chance to pay back. In the end, the success is yours.”