



TEXT: KAREN TEE. CLOTHES: WOOL COAT, COTTON SHIRT, COTTON TROUSERS & SILK TIE, FROM BRUNELLO CUCINELLI

Plastic can be Fantastic

His urban landscaping company takes the oft-vilified material and turns it into a credible eco-friendly solution.

WHO

Alan Lee
Founder and executive chairman, Elmich

YEAR ESTABLISHED

1985

WHAT IT DOES

Provides eco-friendly urban landscaping, waterproofing, drainage, green roofs and storm water management solutions

I go on about two cruises a year. It is a very lazy way of travelling as you pack and unpack once, and that's it. I can sit on the deck of the ship, watch the waves and dream.

For Alan Lee, making the transition from salaried employee to entrepreneur 33 years ago was a matter of life and death. As the general manager of a marine and fishery company in the '80s, he put his life on the line during work trips to places like Somalia, South Yemen, Russia and postwar Vietnam.

"Once, we were stopped by Somali guards with AK-47s as we drove past a roadblock in the desert. Later, we were told that we were lucky I was mistaken for a mainland Chinese or they would have shot us on the spot," says Lee, now 67. At the time, the Chinese were viewed favourably as they provided aid to the country, he explains.

Four years into the job, Lee, who has a bachelor's in engineering in naval architecture from the University of New South Wales in Australia, decided he had had enough close shaves. Through his work in the fishery business, he became familiar with the petroleum industry and saw the opportunity to start his own business in supplying waterproof coating derived from petroleum to construction projects.

He founded Elmich in 1985 and went on to design recycled plastic products such as storm-water tanks and pedestals for boardwalks, as well as for green walls and roofs of buildings. "Recycled plastics are cheaper than virgin plastics," he says of his choice of material. "More importantly, using recycled plastics saves a huge amount of energy and water, and reduces greenhouse gas emissions, which are consequences of manufacturing virgin plastics."

Today, Elmich is a leading global provider of eco-friendly urban landscaping, waterproofing, drainage, green roofs and storm water management solutions. The environmental benefits include urban greening, the reuse of rainwater,

and minimising storm water runoff that contributes to erosion and the depositing of harmful sediments into water bodies. Last year, it saved 25,500 cubic metres of landfill space by recycling plastics that were designated as waste.

Elmich's projects include South-east Asia's largest green roof at Universal Studios in Sentosa and the world's largest green wall project at ITE Central Campus. Globally, Elmich has supplied over 7 million sq m of drainage cells for green roofs, including those at Stanford University School of Medicine's carpark in California.

His success is hard-earned. When he started out, he did not draw a salary for three years. "I was fortunate my wife was working as a merchant banker so she could support me. I was a house husband but didn't take care of the house," he quips.

Even though the Singapore-based company has gained international recognition and has offices in Malaysia, Australia, Switzerland, Germany, Austria and the United States, Lee laments that some people in Singapore still view products by a home-grown brand as being inferior to those by a foreign brand. To prove critics wrong, he focuses on innovating existing offerings to stay ahead of the curve. The company spends 5 per cent of its turnover – revenue in 2016 was \$18 million – on R&D and intellectual property expenses. To date, it holds over 130 patents. Recently, the company developed a type of plastic he believes offers the highest level of fire-resistance among plastics.

"I'm a very competitive person. Maybe that's why I don't play golf, as it's a game where you compete against yourself. I prefer Scrabble or mahjong," he says. "I always have ideas for improvement and I will cannibalise my own market to come up with something new; I don't want to wait for my competitors to come up with it." ㊦

I don't do social media but I love gadgets. I read technology magazine *T3* to find out about the latest cameras and phones.

I want to learn Mandarin.