



The NUS team working on the project, including (from left) Mr Edward Chu, Ms Sharmaine Sie, assistant professor Jude Yew, and Mr Tin Wei Yang, plans to work with Singapore Post so hawkers, donors and buyers can drop off or collect their items at PopStations islandwide. PHOTO: JASON QUAH

NUS team hopes its app will keep Thieves' Market alive

Sungei Treasures will allow hawkers to show off their wares and receive donated goods

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SINGAPORE – It was at the Sungei Road flea market that Dr Jude Yew got his first turntable in the 1980s as an aspiring DJ at the age of 14.

Over the years, the bargain paradise with a history just a decade shy of a century continued to be his regular haunt.

“I hung out there a lot because my secondary school was around there ... This was where I acquired most of my equipment to work as a part-time mobile DJ,” said the 45-year-old, who studied at St Joseph’s Institution.

So the impending closure of Singapore’s last free-hawking zone spurred Dr Yew, an assistant professor in the National University of Singapore’s (NUS) Department of Communications and New Media (CNM), to do something to keep memories of the place alive after the hawkers

pack up for good on July 10.

Together with four NUS undergraduates, Dr Yew came up with a digital platform named Sungei Treasures for hawkers to show off their wares. In addition to the “buy” and “sell” functions similar to online marketplaces such as Carousell, Sungei Treasures will include a “give” function for donations of second-hand items to the hawker — a prevalent practice at the Thieves’ Market.

The project, which is currently in its prototyping phase, clinched the first runner-up position in a student design challenge held in Indonesia in April, where teams demonstrate their problem-solving and design abilities to address socio-cultural issues.

But whether the hawkers will take to the app is a big question mark at the moment. During interviews with the hawkers, the top concerns that came up include the vendors’ reluctance to adopt cashless transactions and the challenge of delivering items amid their mobility issues, the team said.

Mr Tin Wei Yang, 24, one of the students involved in the project, said: “We are fairly confident of getting the funds to execute (Sungei Treasures).

But if the vendors do not come on board, it may be hard for the project to move ahead. We have had pretty mixed responses from them so far.”

Started in the 1930s, Thieves’ Market used to be the oldest and largest flea market in Singapore. It has had a colourful history since earning its name in the early days as a place to trade stolen, smuggled or illegal goods.

In 2011, it was shrunk by half to make way for the construction of the new Jalan Besar MRT Station, as the authorities signalled that the hawkers would have to move out eventually.

Since then, the hawkers have banded together to propose possible new sites for the relocation of the iconic bazaar, but the authorities have made it clear this would not happen.

In announcing the final closing date in February, the authorities said that, while the area has had a long history and holds special memories for many Singaporeans, “the Government has assessed that such street trades should only be allowed to continue in designated venues like trade fairs and flea markets, rather than on a permanent basis, to minimise disamenities to the public”.

The NUS team, which started on the project in December last year, plans to work with Singapore Post (SingPost) so that hawkers, donors and buyers can drop off or collect their items at PopStations (Pick Own Parcel Stations) islandwide.

A shared passion for reducing waste in Singapore was another factor that fuelled the team, which com-

prises Mr Tin and his computing classmates Edward Chu and Joseph Cheng, as well as CNM undergraduate Sharmaine Sie.

“These hawkers contribute to the larger sustainability ecosystem by recirculating goods back into the marketplace, rather than in junkyards and incinerators,” said Mr Tin.

While buyers can pay for their purchases online, the team is thinking of a way for vendors to collect payments in cash, a method that they prefer.

One idea is for PopStations to be outfitted with ATMs that can dispense cash payments to hawkers as soon as they deliver sold items to the station.

Leveraging SingPost’s islandwide network of lockers will help simplify the logistics of delivery, said Mr Tin.

Still, he recognises that the implementation process will not be smooth-sailing. “While all the hawkers have mobile phones — and we will certainly offer training sessions — it will still be a big technological leap for them.”

President of the Sungei Road market association Koh Eng Khoon felt that a virtual platform cannot recreate the experiences of shopping and hawking at the market.

“We still hope to discuss the possibility of finding a new place with the authorities,” he said, adding that the vendors have written to the National Environment Agency for a sit-down discussion on alternative plans.

Another vendor, Mr Chin Kim Bon, who has been at the market for about 20 years, said he would give the platform a try because “any additional avenue for business is good”.

The 70-year-old, who sells antiques and other accessories, already taps apps such as Carousell and WeChat to sell his wares. But business is hard to come by online, he said.

“Sometimes I don’t get any transaction in a month.”

As of May, 44 vendors have taken up various assistance options offered by the authorities, including employment and financial help, and the facilitation of applications for hawker stalls.

Mr Chin is one of the 20 vendors who have been allocated lock-up stalls. He has been tending to his stall at North Bridge Road Market for a few weeks now but sales so far pale in comparison to when he was at Thieves’ Market, said Mr Chin.

“Most who come by here are office workers who look out for different things. I might have to change what I sell, but that will take some time,” he added.

For Dr Yew, a Technics SL-1000 turntable is what is left for him to reminisce about the market after it goes.

“This is probably what I consider my most prized possession. Although it no longer works, it holds memories of my younger days and one of my favourite hangouts,” he said.

“This place will always have a soft spot in my heart ... This is one of the few places in Singapore where you can get a pair of shoes for S\$5, a place where those down on their luck can turn to.”

BUY, SELL AND GIVE

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