

Cool Mobility

SATOSHI SUGIE DESIGNS
PERSONAL MOBILITY FOR
THE NEXT GENERATION

LUCA MAJERO

SATOSHI Sugie is on a mission to develop a new kind of personal mobility device - one that offers stylish and fun movement for everyone. After just a year's work, his prototype blew the public away at the 42nd Tokyo Motor Show 2011, and he's now bringing the complete, upgraded model to market for 2014.

Born in 1982 in Hamamatsu City, Shizuoka Prefecture, Sugie became interested in engineering during his university years. "I met a designer from Nissan and I realized that I like to create new things - to manufacture new things," he says.

He joined Nissan as a company engineer, but for Sugie, design wasn't a career but a passion. "I didn't want to do this as a job," he says. "I wanted to do this because I liked it. Seeing how the products I made had the potential to quickly gain global recognition, I dreamed of designing something that would do just that. I didn't really care about cars but about the international aspect of creating a product that would impact the whole world."

Sugie's global passion led him to leave Nissan after a few years. Deciding it would benefit him to learn Chinese, a language spoken by



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The unique front wheel of the WHILL type-A



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- 1 Satoshi Sugie
- 2 The WHILL type-A in action
- 3 The WHILL type-A controller
- 4 The WHILL type-A is compact
- 5 The WHILL type-A allows users to sit up comfortably

one-sixth of people on Earth, he first went to teach Japanese in China. With a great spirit of adventure, he then went on to explore Bolivia, Laos, Papua New Guinea, Uzbekistan and numerous other countries.

In 2010, he met a Japanese wheelchair user who told him that he was embarrassed to be seen outside: “I’m giving up on going to the convenience store 100 meters down the street,” the man is reported to have said. Moved by this confession, Sugie gathered some of his engineering friends and together they decided to “make something that will make this person feel ‘cool’ to go outside - something we ourselves would want to use,” Sugie explains.

The group met every weekend for about a year, like a club pursuing a hobby. Their efforts culminated in the WHILL Concept. Resembling a giant set of modern headphones, it was essentially an electrical engine designed to be placed over the wheels of an ordinary wheelchair, providing automated driving power with a cool, space-age image.

This prototype, built on the principle of ‘smart aggressive flight,’ received a great deal of attention at the Tokyo Motor Show, even in spite of some lingering problems such as its excessive width and difficulty keeping below the legally proscribed speed. “We didn’t expect such a powerful reaction,” Sugie says. “People looked at our wheelchair and said, ‘Where did you get that? I want to buy one, too!’” Refusing to stop with a mere prototype, Sugie decided to focus on this project exclusively and mass produce the device to make it available to everyone who expressed an interest. With this in mind, in 2012 he founded WHILL, Inc., with offices in Tokyo and California, to manufacture the next generation of personal mobility.

Going beyond the level of a mere motorized add-on, the company’s latest creation, the WHILL type-A, is a standalone, personal mobility device that advances traditional wheelchairs to the age of slick, modern design. Not only does it offer greater off-road mobility, a smaller frame, better maneuverability and a more comfortable seat than a standard wheelchair, it also looks cooler than anything else available in the same price range. Presently priced at \$9,500, in June 2013 the WHILL type-A won the top award in the life science category at Launch: Silicon Valley, a major product launch event co-presented by Silicon Valley networking group SVForum, venture capital fund Garage Technology Ventures and Microsoft.

The prize is well deserved, but it’s received in the spirit of pursuing a dream, and Sugie says there’s still much to be done: “We only recently began production, and we’re working to bring our customers a product they can be satisfied with.” For Sugie, it seems the achievement of any one goal only lays the foundation for the next. 