

Hummingbird

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Design has fascinated me ever since I was a kid: I was always looking to improve things around my house. Sometimes that would end in disaster, like the time I poured paint in our VCR to make our black and white tv show colours! But most of the time I would improve or change my toys.

Bad design is everywhere and sometimes it is invisible to us. One of the worst designs of our civilisation is the car infrastructure built around cities. So ever since I was a teenager I've been obsessed with exploring my city – Bucharest, Romania – and I found that cycling is the perfect means of transportation. However, the products on the market seemed to have ignored a niche – commuters need lightweight folding bikes that can fit in their cars / on the tube and ease their experience. So did Ligia, who had also expressed an interest in getting around by bike but lived in a fourth-floor flat with a tiny lift, and like most of us, simply wasn't willing or able to struggle upstairs with 12 kilograms of over-engineered folding technology. I bought her a light but wobbly Bickerton, which more or less fitted the bill, but it wasn't the solution she was hoping for. Even though it was lighter than other folding bikes on the market, it was extremely wobbly and didn't feel secure. During its maiden voyage the handlebars collapsed when Ligia hit a pothole and that was when I decided to create a carbon fibre folding bike that would be lightweight and strong.

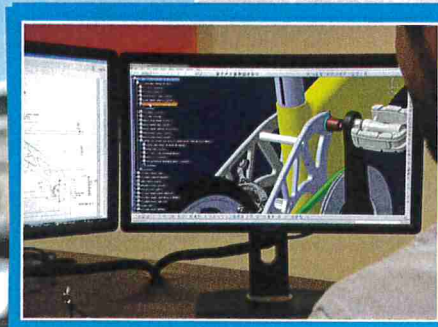


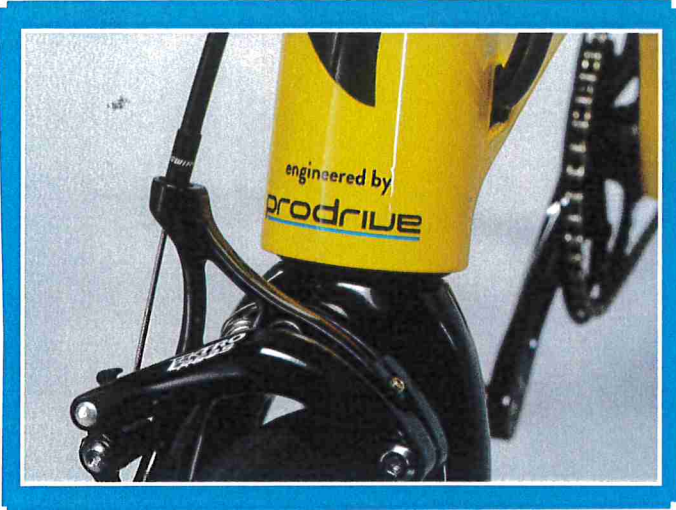
I decided to use this as my final project at university. My teachers were somewhat unconvinced that the product would actually work, so I made it a habit of cycling my ever-changing prototype around the campus. People started noticing it and an idea started forming in my head. The key technology would be a one-piece carbon fibre frame, with a CNC-machined aluminium rear frame that could be quick-released to rotate around the bottom bracket and fold away under the mainframe tube. This simple but rigid core could then be equipped with an alloy handlebar stem that could fold back against the frame, and a carbon seat pillar that dropped down through the main frame tube, thus holding everything

together. Simplicity and weight go hand in hand and most designers focus on the wrong metric, folded size rather than the human scale which is weight, especially when carrying a product. Unlike the Brompton or Birdy, the front wheel didn't fold back, so it wasn't the most compact bike in the world, but hinges, brackets and widgets all add weight, and the accent here was on weight rather than size.

Kick started

Even after I graduated, I kept my dream of turning this light folding bike into a real product and decided that crowdfunding was the way to move things forward. I worked on creating a fun script for our promotional video (did you know that a Hummingbird bike weighs as much as three pineapples?) and spent my evenings working on our Kickstarter project, while still having a full-time job as a product designer at a small design practice.





When our Kickstarter campaign was funded I found myself in need of starting a real business: registering the name, finding investment and having a real office (my small studio apartment in Kentish Town was no longer an option!). Things moved quite quickly from here – through networking, I found partners that were interested in helping Hummingbird grow and even found a manufacturing partner (Prodrive) that pushed the business into the right direction.

Over the last three years I've been working together with the Prodrive team in Banbury and I've been involved in all aspects of the business, as every founder usually is, from product design to marketing and sales, maintaining customer relationships to working on product iterations, live prototyping and working on the next model.

Winning formula

Hummingbird is now on the market, the lightest carbon fibre folding bike in the world, weighing only 6.9kg and winner of numerous design awards. Last year I designed an electric version of the bike that weighs only 10kg, also the lightest on the folding e-bikes market. The journey has been fascinating and throughout the process I have been constantly learning more about myself, but also about the world. I'm also aware that during these years, I have had a lot of help and luck.

If I had to give a piece of advice learnt from this journey, it would be this: if you are curious about a problem, seek the expert in that field and ask for his help. When combined, knowledge and enthusiasm are powerful forces! ■

www.hummingbirdbike.com

