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SUCCESS BY DESIGN

**CHRIS LEE, FOUNDER AND
CREATIVE DIRECTOR, ASYLUM**

**LEADING CREATIVES ON SINGAPORE'S BLUEPRINT
TRAVERSING CONTINENTS IN YOUR PRIVATE RAILCAR
WHAT GOES INTO A BOTTLE OF \$10,000 BORDEAUX?**



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Patrick Chia, design director of the Design Incubation Centre at The National University of Singapore, believes that the measure of whether we are a design hub lies in having an original point of view.

DESIGN NATION

SINGAPORE HAS ITS FAIR SHARE OF STYLISH BUILDINGS AND INTERNATIONALLY RECOGNISED PRODUCTS, BUT CAN WE CLAIM TO BE A HUB OF DESIGN CREATIVITY? FOUR BIG GUNS FROM THE INDUSTRY WEIGH IN ON THE ISSUE WITH CHARMIAN LEONG.

PHOTOGRAPHY VEE CHIN, JUSTIN LOH & WINSTON CHUANG ART DIRECTION NORSHAM HUSAINI

The durian-shaped Esplanade. The “ark” over Marina Bay Sands. The technicolour roofs of Clarke Quay.

For a small country, Singapore can boast some rather iconic architecture. Even the humblest of homes often feature well-thought-out decor and carefully sourced furniture, whether designer or Ikea or an eclectic mix of both.

We’ve come a long way from our Third World past and by all appearances, Singaporeans are as design-savvy as they come. But as a country, can we rightfully claim that Singapore has reached the level of a design hub?

CHARACTER BUILDING

It’s a question we posed to local design luminaries. But before we can dissect our buildings and cross-reference our skyline, we need to establish what our

collective design identity is – if it exists at all, as Nathan Yong points out.

The founder of local furniture brand Air Division and owner of an eponymous label believes we’re still too young to have properly established one. “But that’s fine. It’s better than having the government engineer one, as they are wont to do. Some things are better off taking a natural course.” He adds pointedly: “I’d rather have no identity than a fake one.”

Patrick Chia, design director of the Design Incubation Centre at the National University of Singapore, thinks there may be a glimmer of hope. “We’re still at the ‘borrowing’ stage,” he reckons, noting that he still sees a lot of Scandinavian influences in local work. “Unfortunately, a measure of whether we’re a hub or not lies in having an original point of view,” he adds. “There are very few who can internalise these influences and come up with something totally new. But at least we’re borrowing well.”

Because of the evolutionary nature of design, it’s perhaps difficult to fault Singaporean designers for being affected by the aesthetic codes of nations more advanced, design-wise, than ours.

Says Colin Seah, executive director of the Ministry of Design: “Around the 1930s and ‘40s, it was post-colonially influenced. A decade after that, it was all about nation-building, led by greats like Tay Kheng Soon and William Lim, all of whom had nationalistic and cultural momentum to fuel their work. And now, we’re finally coming to embrace more fringe design.”

You might think the enormous palm- or lotus-shaped building that is our Artscience Museum a prime example of boundary-pushing design, but even retail stores like Actually – with its hanging items and claw-footed tables – are proving that this fringe is creeping into the everyday.

Besides, it’s also our innate versatility that gives us a unique



Colin Seah, executive director of the Ministry of Design, is glad that locals have come to embrace more fringe design.

Opposite: Executive director of the DesignSingapore Council Jeffrey Ho thinks that local designers have the advantage of moving nimbly between Asian lifestyles and Western ideas.

thumbprint. "Designers here have the advantage of staying in a multicultural country," says Jeffrey Ho, executive director of the DesignSingapore Council (DSC).

"We can move very nimbly between Asian lifestyles and Western ideas. One set of colours might be more pleasing to one race than another and this is the kind of thing we're very clued in to." The trick now is to get the rest of the world to notice.

MAKING A MARK

That's not to say that Singapore's talent isn't being recognised. Yong counts

among his clients renowned furniture houses like Ligne Roset of France, Living Divani of Italy and Ethicraft of Belgium. Online design sites have also picked up on the "Treasures of the Little Red Dot" exhibition by local designers at last year's Salone Internazionale del Mobile in Milan.

And as Seah points out: "Design gems like Graze and Booksactually have been featured in *Wallpaper* and *Monocle*. They have found us."

The reason many of us may not be aware of our blossoming international cred and design culture may be due to an absence of these local designers

in our stores and buildings. After all, when it comes down to it, we seem to prefer foreign talent – for example, the Singapore Flyer was dreamed up by a Japanese architectural firm, while many of us are probably swivelling on Herman Miller chairs.

"One possible reason is there is a lack of respect for the designer's point of view," Seah adds. "We don't argue with a doctor's prescription, but it's common for businesses to choose whatever they want despite what we may advise."

It's quite the opposite in countries like Korea, says Chia. "They're pushing design aggressively over there. Just look at Samsung. They used to be a manufacturing-based company, but now they are all about design."

Ironically, it's the Western countries that are often given more credit than they're due. "In Italy, it takes five months to change a window there because everything is historic and everyone is so deathly afraid to change anything," says Seah.

"And when people think of the US as 'very happening', they're only picturing New York, not Wisconsin or Minneapolis. But I believe our population can grow to be like the Nordic countries, where the everyday man is aware of the latest town hall design competition and that there is life beyond Ikea."

Seah admits to finding the term "hub" very corny. He prefers that we call ourselves an "ecology", with a free flow of ideas from the people for the people. But he understands DSC's role in pushing local brands on the world stage. "Their agenda is more commercially driven because they want a contributing force to the economy, to make Singapore a brand," he adds. "These are good objectives, but you can't flick a switch and expect people to change overnight."

A man with short dark hair and round glasses is shown from the chest up, wearing a dark suit jacket, a light-colored patterned shirt, and a dark tie. He is looking slightly to his left. The background is a wall with a complex geometric pattern of light-colored wood panels, creating a series of interconnected shapes. The lighting is warm and even.

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WORK IN PROGRESS

To be fair to the DSC, it is doing everything it can to nudge the community in the right direction. Says Ho: "We want to get local businesses to use design as a competitive edge. After all, strategies like lowering prices and packing in more features and services can only go so far."

The DSC is pushing a concept known as "design thinking", where design is used to solve problems. "You need to really understand your clients, whether it's by conducting interviews or shadowing them to see how they work around functional gaps in their lifestyle," Ho adds. "Design also needs to be holistic. You shouldn't pay one person to do your logo and another to decorate your space. The elements won't gel."

To get businesses on board, the DSC is willing to fund 50 per cent of a company's design consultation fees up to \$70,000. "We can also recommend design firms if you don't have one in mind," Ho explains. "It's also a way for us to market local designers."

Its Overseas Promotion Partnership Programme has also helped companies like design collective Outofstock, furniture designer Jarrod Kim and even the Azimuth Watch Company to showcase their works at international platforms. The National Design Centre is also due to open next year at 111 Middle Road. It aims to house prototyping facilities, the Design Thinking and Innovation Academy, Asian Insights & Design Innovation lab, collaborative spaces for new products as well as galleries.

Yet, even without the government's giving hand, Chia believes that it is only be a matter of time. "The next generation of truly gifted designers will find their own way regardless of what we do for them," he says.

"If we want to be a hub on every level, we need to continue to support them even when it stops being trendy to do it. Once we've established that we're in it for the long haul, the next step is to find our own voice – look inside and stop frantically chasing what other people are doing."

And Seah believes that developing our own unique identity means learning to let go. "Everything in Singapore tends to be planned, with some kind of 2050 blueprint, but we needed that to go from swamp to city. Now, we have to let go and let people express what they want, make some mistakes. You can't plan that and that's how we get real."

Ultimately, Singapore needs to stop seeing the future of its design as a destination to get to. From the efforts of the industry's notables and years of natural development, the country's entire infrastructure – from the towering housing blocks to other disciplines like fashion and jewellery – is bursting with potential.

"We curated a show at the 2010 Venice Biennale called 1000 Singapores, showing how a compact city model like ours can hold 6.5 million people," Ho recalls. "And it's not squashed. We have parks and plenty of green. So from that point of view, we can tell everyone that 1,000 Singapores can house the whole world." 🍷



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