

# **Design Industry in Singapore**

(Taken from Chapter 3: The “Design Singapore” Initiative)

## **Introduction**

“Design can be understood as material and conceptual innovation, realized through the integration of arts, culture, business and technology, and experienced as beauty, value and meaning” (“The Design Singapore Initiative”, n.d, pg 21, par 4).

With the rapid advancement and growing convenience in technology today, local and international industries alike face an increasingly intense competition to provide the best functionalities at the most competitive prices.

In order to be ahead of the race, one must be able to incorporate innovativeness as well as creativity to invent new markets that stand out from the rest.

Design, which brings about the combination of business, technology and the Arts has recently “emerged as the key differentiation strategy for businesses” (“The Design Singapore Initiative”, n.d, pg 21, par 2).

With an increase in awareness and growing interest in design, the industry today has seen tremendous potential for design development and foresees more than an increase of 20% by the year 2008.

“Design embraces not only aesthetics but also market research, usability, safety, economics, environmental sustainability, new technologies, logistics, and consumer experience” (“The Design Singapore Initiative”, n.d, pg 21, par 4).

Governments around the world have recognised the importance of design to national competitiveness in the following ways:

- Driving the innovation process and hence industry competitiveness.
- Contributing to the level of creativity, cultural buzz and attractiveness of a place for global talent.
- Strengthening the marketing and unique “branding” of a country.

## **State of Design in Singapore Today**

### ***1. Design Industry***

In a 2001 study on the economic impact of product and visual communication design activities in Singapore (1999-2000), the output of the design cluster in Singapore amounted to \$3.9 billion in direct contribution to GDP, an additional \$3 billion in direct contribution, and \$2.7 billion in value added which is a total 1.9% of GDP. The cluster, comprising more than 3500 establishments, directly employed some 25,000 individuals. Significantly, the economic spin-offs from design were much higher than that for the other industries. Design is therefore one of the best ways to enhance and create new value in any industry.

### ***2. Government's Role in developing Design***

The Economic Development Board (EDB) and International Enterprise Singapore (IE Singapore) have been the government agencies looking after the design industry and the design capabilities of companies in Singapore, including the attraction of international design companies to locate in Singapore, while IE Singapore is currently promoting and developing design as a strategic business capability for Singapore-based companies for internationalisation. IE Singapore's efforts encompass the development of new products and product adaptation capabilities for international markets as well as branding. Together with its strategic partners, IE Singapore also organizes the Singapore Design Awards, the Young Designers Award, and the International Design Forum.

### ***3. Design Education***

Design is taught as part of the "Design and Technology" course- a compulsory subject at lower Secondary and optional at upper Secondary levels. The 4 Polytechnics and Specialised Art Schools (Lasalle-SIA College of the Arts and Nayang Academy of Fine Arts [NAFA]) provide diploma level education in the various design disciplines. Some 1500 and 800 students are registered for design related courses at the Polytechnics and Art Schools in 2001 respectively. Lasalle-SIA and NAFA also collaborate with foreign universities to offer design-related degree courses.

## Strengths and Opportunities

Singapore's relatively small but sophisticated market and consumer base, our existing strengths in infocomm integration and other technology-intensive industries, as well as our unique position as a English-speaking gateway to Asia underlie the opportunities for design in Singapore.

- *A Leading Design and Experience Island:*

From urban planning to the design of public services such as our libraries and hospitals, and attractions such as the Night Safari, successful design marrying efficiency with beauty, technology with consumer sensitivity, has been employed to enhance total user experience and human potential.

- *A Global Design & Innovation Testbed for Pilots and Trials:*

This would include market research and the re-design of global products and services, leveraging on our multicultural population, and access to the Asian market; and the 'hothousing' of new design ideas, leveraging on our technological expertise and industrial and research infrastructure. Such a positioning would, in the long term, contribute to building our design expertise and reputation as a design hub in Asia.

- *"New Asia" branding as a Unique and Exportable Style:*

The New Asia branding would leverage on Singapore's unique position as both a gateway to the various cultures of Asia and a contemporary cosmopolitan city, as the basis for design identity and values. This is particularly in the areas of lifestyle products and services, such as food and beverage, hospitality, entertainment and retail services sectors.

## **Gaps and Challenges**

### *Challenge 1: From Basic Bottomline to Design Excellence & Innovation*

In focusing on short-term bottomline gains, companies often fail to consider design strategies and to leverage design excellence as a means of producing unique and globally competitive products and services. There is also the misconception that design is only about aesthetics or packaging. The challenge is therefore to bring about a fundamental change towards valuing design excellence as a sustainable and strategic advantage for organisations.

### *Challenge 2: From Importing Design to Nurturing Local Design Capabilities*

In the last 30 years of our economic and urban development, design consumption and import have outstripped the supply and export of the local design cluster. Although the design industry cut across a spectrum of activities from industrial, environment and multimedia design to visual communications, there has been no concerted effort to measure, study and coordinate the development of this cluster in a more holistic fashion. And while the components of a design system (such as design education, design companies, designers, innovation centres, design awards and conferences, and various grants and assistance schemes) are in place, efforts to develop resources for this sector are fragmented. The challenge is to synergise and build up local resources and capabilities, to nurture and raise the standards of the design cluster to be able to meet the competitive needs in Singapore and globally.

### *Challenge 3: From Manufactured to Designed in Singapore*

While design activities are estimated to contribute a total of 1.9% of GDP in 2000, the true value of design in Singapore is still not fully realised and captured. This is especially as parts or final finished products are often not Singapore products or marketed and branded as designed in Singapore. The challenge is not only to anchor more design activities (design projects, enterprises and expertise) in Singapore, but more importantly, to capture the full value of products and services designed in Singapore.

### *Challenge 4: From Technical to Multidisciplinary Design Education*

The potential of design education and its significance as a creative thinking and innovation tool is not fully tapped in Singapore. Design has been mainly approached as part of a technical education. Current gaps in a professional art and design education at university level would also need to be addressed. The challenge is to move towards a more holistic multidisciplinary design education to develop design professionals who can position design more strategically as an integration of the aesthetic, business, technological and sociological concerns. At the same time, to embed design in the

teaching and learning of other disciplines and capabilities, such as in business and engineering schools.

*Challenge 5: From Low to High Design Awareness*

There is currently a low awareness of good design – its role, significance and qualities – or of the design industry and profession. The challenge is to raise the current level of public awareness on the use and impact of effective design in all aspects of life, through the fostering of a more pervasive design culture.

## **Design Council Singapore's Initiatives**

(Taken from Chapter 3: The "Design Singapore" Initiative)

The "Design Singapore" Initiative is the first national collaborative strategy to spearhead the promotion of design and tap on our business, artistic, cultural and technological resources and capabilities.

It will seek to bring about convergence amongst the different players in the design ecosystem: enterprise (industry users and designers), expertise and education.

The Design Council Singapore aims to position design as the creative integration of art, culture, business and technology with the ability to drive innovation and competitiveness.

The vision is therefore for Singapore to be "A global cultural and business hub for the design of products, content, and services, where design consciousness and creativity permeated all aspects of work, home and recreation".

To achieve this, the vision is branched into four objectives:

1. To turn Singapore into a leading centre for contemporary design in Asia.

We aim to attract regional and international design talents to work from Singapore, nurture innovative design firms, as well as to be both a leading provider of design education and the launchpad for creative and innovative designs into Asia.

2. To evolve a distinctive Singapore design and brand identity.

We aim for Singapore products and services to be imbued with a unique design identity in the global market, and for the "designed-in-Singapore" reputation to be a valuable branding, synonymous with high quality, integrity, creativity and excellence.

3. To be a competitive advantage for local enterprises.

4. To encourage a pervasive design culture.

We aim to raise the general level of design awareness and discourse, where effective design is understood and integrated into in all aspects of business, leisure and recreation, public service and education in Singapore.

## **STRATEGIES AND PRELIMINARY RECOMMENDATIONS**

(Taken from Chapter 3: The “Design Singapore” Initiative)

### **Strategy 1: Integrate DESIGN IN ENTERPRISE**

This first strategy recognises industry as a key driver of design, hence the need for industry to be equipped to leverage on design excellence, to embed design in their businesses and to get design into boardroom agendas.

#### ***Recommendation 1.1: Identify and Develop Iconic Singapore Products and Services***

It is proposed that we identify and develop potential iconic “killer applications” that would help establish the standard for design excellence in Singapore, and to jumpstart the design initiative in industries. This could begin with industries where Singapore already has existing strengths and a unique proposition. Examples of potential industries include the hospitality and entertainment industry, where the design of consumer experience is critical, or infocomm, healthcare and medical products, where design would be sensitive to ergonomics, lifestyle, styling and new technologies.

#### ***Recommendation 1.2: Promote Design in the Public Sector***

To catalyse the development of effective design in Singapore and to nurture local design expertise, it is proposed that public sector agencies lead by example in supporting the use of effective design in its public buildings, amenities, services and spaces.

#### ***Recommendation 1.3: Raise Business Awareness of Design Excellence***

Many companies, particularly SMEs, are not aware of the use and advantages of effective design. There is currently also no concerted effort to promote design to enterprises. It is proposed that there be a dedicated programme to develop regular case studies, surveys, global benchmarking, and other statistical analysis or tools as resources to promote design to companies.

#### ***Recommendation 1.4: Facilitate Use of Design by Businesses***

There are currently many incentive and assistance schemes targeted at helping companies to redevelop their business processes, engage in R&D, internationalise, develop their manpower capabilities and so on. These include EDB’s Start-up Enterprise Development Scheme (SEEDS), Research Incentive Scheme, and the Talent & Attachment Programme (TAP). IE Singapore also currently offers a grant of up to 50% of the company’s cost in

engaging a design consultant. Instead of proliferating the number of assistance schemes for businesses, it is recommended that we review the existing schemes with a view to encouraging the use of design.

## **Strategy 2: Develop a Vibrant & Professional DESIGN COMMUNITY**

It is critical to nurture a vibrant design community in Singapore as the backbone of Singapore's design ecosystem, to raise the standard of design and provide the necessary expertise for both a sustainable growth of the design industry and a reputation for design excellence.

### ***Recommendation 2.1: Establish a Flagship University Programme in Art, Design and Media***

A flagship art, design and media programme at university level would help raise a new generation of creative designers with a strong intellectual foundation in the arts and humanities, and skills to integrate technology and business in design. The programme would offer degree courses in fine arts, design and multimedia, and work synergistically with the industry in research projects. In addition, the new School of Art, Design and Media should target a diverse and global intake, to create both a vibrant environment as well as anchor young regional and international talents to Singapore. The School would also contribute to design education in schools as well as to continuing professional development (CPD) for designers.

### ***Recommendation 2.2: Enhance Design Education in Secondary Schools, Polytechnics & Arts Schools***

Our polytechnics have been offering diploma programmes in design for the industry in the areas of fashion, media, product, graphic and interior design. It is critical that they continue to develop their teaching programme. It is recommended that a more detailed review of the existing design programme be made to enhance the diversity of options for students while enabling polytechnics to excel in specific areas. This would be with a view to deepen the level of industry collaboration, raise the standard of the design programme, and allow a more efficient distribution of resources, including professional talents. At the schools level, resources need to be better directed to strengthen the Design and Technology programme in selected schools to raise the profile of design earlier in the education process.

### ***Recommendation 2.3: Establish Design Testbeds***

To build up Singapore's capabilities in the area of research and hothousing of design

concepts, it is recommended that a network of leading design entities be established to create design incubation centres and testbeds. For this purpose, we recommend the establishment of a Media Lab in Singapore to engage in multi-disciplinary media research and development sponsored by the industry. This could be integrated into the School of Art, Media and Design at the university.

#### ***Recommendation 2.4: Enhance Professional Standing of Designers***

To raise the profile of the design profession, attract young talents to the industry and build up Singapore's design capabilities and standards, it would be critical to raise the professional standing of designers in Singapore. This would include enhancing the professional recognition by developing and implementing quality and performance standards for the industry, as well as professional codes of practice and conduct, in collaboration with industry and professional associations<sup>8</sup>. This would also include developing a continuing professional development programme for designers. At the same time, a new or existing award should be set as the highest national award for design excellence, and be formalised to an international standard. <sup>8</sup> Some industry and professional associations in Singapore include: the Designers' Association Singapore, the Singapore Institute of Architects, the Society of Interior Designers, the Accredited Advertising Agents Association, the Singapore Furniture Industry Council and the Textile and Fashion Federation. <sup>31</sup> Like the famous Compasso D'Oro, the top design award in Europe, the exhibits can automatically form a new collection of Singapore designs.

### **Strategy 3: Position Singapore as a Global DESIGN HUB**

This strategy seeks to galvanise design-centric enterprises and organisations, design expertise and design educational institutes in Singapore so as to establish Singapore's reputation and position as a design hub.

#### ***Recommendation 3.1: Establish a National Design Council***

While many components of a design ecosystem are in place in Singapore, there is still a need for a central organisation at the national level to champion the design cluster and synergise the activities and concerns of the various players. It is therefore recommended that a National agency for design be set up with representation at the highest level for industry, the design community, education institutions and the public sector. Such an agency would also allow Singapore to tap into the international design network, and with the other national design councils and organisations<sup>9</sup>. This agency would therefore be positioned to (a) forge links as the one-stop contact for design both locally and internationally; (b) nurture the local design industry; and (c) champion design excellence in Singapore.

### ***Recommendation 3.2: Anchor International Design Companies and Activities in Singapore***

To further grow Singapore's design capabilities, over and above nurturing local design expertise, it is proposed that we attract and anchor key international design firms to Singapore, as well as MNCs to locate their design functions and headquarters in Singapore. The latter would also allow us to better capture the full value of design in Singapore. In addition, while we develop a national award and local design events to international standards, it is recommended that we identify and actively seek to anchor at least one major international design award in Singapore, as well as to host international design conferences. This would allow Singapore to feature prominently in the international design network as a design hub. 9 Design Councils are well established in countries such as the UK, Spain, Denmark, Finland and Germany, and are partially funded by the government. Hong Kong has recently established a Design Centre to pull together previously fragmented efforts to develop design, and as part of the Government strategy to increase the level of innovation, to develop higher value-added products and services and nurture a creative skills base.

### ***Recommendation 3.3: A National Marketing and Branding Strategy***

Singapore has mainly used Expos and World's Fairs to promote its tourism but, unlike many countries, not fully exploited the opportunity to showcase its design efforts and profile its visions and challenges. It is recommended that Singapore's participation at such international platforms be carefully planned to advance the profile and visibility of Singapore's design capabilities and facilitate networking. It is further proposed that the promotion of unique Singapore design, products and services abroad be synergised with a national marketing and branding effort. This would require us to embark on a national branding strategy, with the involvement of the private, people and public sectors, to present a compelling and consistent Singapore story and brand.

## **Strategy 4: Foster a DESIGN CULTURE & Awareness**

### ***Recommendation 4.1: Embed Design in All Levels of Education***

As design brings together arts, business and technology, design concepts and processes serve as problem solving tools, but more importantly, help to unleash students' creativity and develop a creative outlook. The taskforce proposes that design concepts and design

as a tool be embedded to enhance the teaching of subjects such as art, business, engineering, communications and IT at the schools, polytechnic as well as university levels. This would help raise the level of design awareness and at the same time enhance the teaching in existing curriculum and courses.

***Recommendation 4.2: Bring Design Everywhere***

To raise public awareness on the significance of design and help foster a design-sensitive culture, it is proposed that a variety of design events and exhibitions be organised.

(a) Community level: the regular showcasing of design (both Singaporean and international), leveraging on the extensive museum and library network of the National Heritage Board and the National Library Board, as well as in community spaces, schools and shopping malls.

(b) Specific Groups & Issues: workshops, conferences and exhibitions targeting specific groups or organised around specific themes. This takes the example of the “Design-in-Business Week” or the “Design-in-Education Week” organised by the UK Design Council.

(c) National Level: It is further proposed that, to register the importance of design for Singapore’s continued competitiveness, to designate a “Design Singapore” Year, to coincide also with the national marketing and branding strategy.

***Recommendation 4.3: Design in the Mass Media***

A key player in the design ecosystem, most clearly seen in countries such as Italy, Japan and USA, is the media – where journalists and various media platforms play a central role in promoting design both locally and globally. It is proposed that an active media programme be pursued to raise the profile of design.

## **IDC Initiatives to match “Design Singapore’s” Initiatives**

In line with the “Design Singapore” Council’s initiatives to propel the design industry in Singapore, IDC aims to achieve the following:

### ***1. Promote the Design Culture among local design practitioners***

IDC hopes to reach out to aspiring and practicing designers as a “design haven” which they can be sure that their ideas and aspirations will not be taken lightly and a place where they can take refuge in to further the goals they would like to achieve in this field. Designers are always welcomed to congregate and voice their thoughts and interest with others who share the similar passion for design.

Through this, designers young and old can build up a network and increase their contacts as well as widen their horizons as different creative designers see things differently.

From here, IDC aspires to once again bring life to the design industry and inculcate the design culture among the local designers with the aim of taking the design industry in Singapore to greater heights.

### ***2. Create public awareness and acceptance***

Through a series of workshops, seminars as well as exhibitions held with regards to design, IDC hopes to be able to share the passion and beauty of design be it through aesthetics or through Design Management with the masses.

Through this, IDC aims to educate the masses on the concept of Design and at the same time, attend to the many negative perceptions that local Singaporeans have on the profession.

### ***3. Increase the respectability of the profession***

IDC intends to engage itself in prestigious creative and design competition both locally and internationally as well as to showcase the completed works of the various designers to Singaporeans from all walks of life.

This is a testimony of the endless boundaries one is capable of achieving with a design career and well as proof that one can also achieve success based on sheer personality and creativity instead of traveling the mainstream road to success.

Through this, IDC hopes to earn the respect and interest from fellow Singaporeans for the design profession.