

■ *What does it take to create a dynamic environment?*
Cultures and counter-cultures work together. By counter-culture, I mean the sense of being able to ask questions, to explore different futures that don't necessarily fit into the norm, and to be able to go off script. It's like a battery with a positive and a negative.

London has this dynamic energy because of this positive and negative loop, and the arts scene, creative scene and business scene feed off one another. And I think Singapore needs that.

But we are finding ourselves dancing around this in our own work in Singapore. A highly paternalistic society like Singapore creates a citizenship which can

Q&A: The Internet is benevolent

sometimes be passive. How do you activate that?

■ *How has the Internet changed the creative scene?*

It's quite difficult to be a struggling undiscovered artist these days, because everything is available to everybody everywhere.

The underground is so quickly the overground. If you see something on the Internet, two minutes later, it is a business, or you discover something and you see everybody else discover it two minutes later.

It's impossible to use the excuse that musicians used to use, and say "no one's discovered me yet". So counterculture becomes culture in a beep. We are absolutely hyper-accelerating everything.

I am personally more inspired by more things than before, and I have more conversations with more people about more interesting things than I have ever done in my life. And if I were a business or a government, I would be using that. Being inspired is incredibly important.

■ *Are there any downsides to this speed?*

Yes. We don't reflect. We live in a consumable culture, we're a little like whales, we go through the ocean with our mouths open.

People go from one experience to the next. Or they do one thing and then want to do it more, and then do it twice, and then do it twice as big. There's also a sense of dissatisfaction in not seeing or doing everything in a way you want to be.

The advice I give to people in our business is, don't forget to reflect. Don't just think about the 'what', think about the 'why'. Why are you doing this?

■ *What are some of the misconceptions that people have about the Internet?*
When the Internet first came around, everybody said: "We can't possibly be transparent. The world would end tomorrow." The reality is the world didn't end tomorrow, it got better.

I think the Internet is the most benevolent force that exists. I joined things like Facebook and Twitter as an early adopter and I had nothing but positive interactions on all of these media.

When I put a blog out or a tweet, 99 per cent of the time, even if I say something contentious, people don't go: "You idiot!" People go: "Okay, have you thought about this? Have you thought about that?"

THE ST INTERVIEW

S'pore 'too cautious for its own good'

Trust intuition more and don't be afraid to fail: Innovation expert



By TAN HUI YEE
CORRESPONDENT

SINGAPORE'S policymakers these days are reaching out to people more than ever before, and some say the consultation slows decisions.

But the opposite is true, says designer Paul Bennett. "If anything, I think it speeds things up, because you are getting more dialogue, more feedback" which help build support for the eventual outcome, he says.

The 48-year-old Briton is chief creative officer of innovation firm Ideo, which also hosts regular discussions on pressing world issues on its website. The firm works with various Singapore government agencies on issues such as fertility, health care and entrepreneurship.

Speaking to The Straits Times recently when he was in town for the Global Entrepolis business summit, he notes how people tend to "overthink" feedback and obsess over that one big idea that will turn their world around.

What's more useful, he says, is an incremental approach, where organisations launch and tweak their creations along the way instead of mustering all their energy into that one big bang.

Solutions do not need to be perfect before launch. "Technology has taught us that the next generation will be along soon and there will be a better version of that, and we will be okay with that."

It's an approach that he advocates for all entities, including Singapore, which he thinks has become far too cautious for its own good.

He has an intimate knowledge of the Republic, having lived here for the first 12 years of his life and worked here for 2½ years in the 1980s.

The Singapore he knew was much more forward-looking in the 1960s. "Singapore was so ahead of competition in the '60s... We used to cross the border into Malaysia and go back in time. (Singapore) was like a time machine."

"And I remember thinking then, Singapore was like America, it was a progressive, cool place. It was very dynamic."

Unfortunately, its phenomenal development has also made it too risk-averse.

"Everybody's measuring every single breath that comes out of an idea," he says.

The term "KPIs", which refers to "key performance indicators", for example, is used far too often here and at the expense of good, intuitive judgment.

Singapore, he says, has become "terrified of its own success on a certain level".

"It's got a highly accelerated growth curve, it's extremely sophisticated, and like any of our corporate clients, it wants to mitigate its own risk by not doing everything in the same way forever."

But it cannot simply measure its way forward into the brave new world, he says.

"If you look at any business, it even-



Mr Paul Bennett, chief creative officer of innovation firm Ideo, says Singapore has become "terrified of its own success on a certain level" and become too risk-averse. He says a nascent idea is as delicate as a bird in the hand – it flies away if you loosen your hold but dies if you squeeze it too tightly. ST PHOTO: LAU FOOK KONG

tually has to make a leap, it doesn't measure itself and then go forward.

"The Googles of the world, the Facebooks of the world, the new businesses that people are benchmarking themselves against, (were built with) creative leaps into the unknown."

He takes pains to stress that he has nothing against KPIs themselves. Rather, he hopes Singapore places more faith in the value of intuition and becomes more comfortable with the prospect of failure.

"I'm not suggesting you are reckless," he says. "But I have worked in the governmental context where fear of failure breeds inertia." It also compels organisations to control "every single piece" of a creation process to ensure nothing goes wrong.

But a nascent idea is as delicate as a bird in the hand – it flies away if you loosen your hold but dies if you squeeze it too tightly.

It needs a gentle touch, he says, just like attempts to tackle the issue of Singapore's low birth rate.

The Singapore Government has been trying to get people to have more babies by dangling cash and other incentives in front of couples.

But incentives just don't work, he says. "You don't give people money to have babies, and you don't give people coupons to go to wine bars to get somebody to marry them... This is not Group for babies."

Nomadic by choice

MR PAUL Bennett, 48, is a managing partner and chief creative officer of Ideo, a design and innovation consultancy.

He is also an ambassador for C&binet, a non-profit network founded by the British government to link international creative and business communities.

He speaks and writes regularly on the topic of human-centred innovation, and keeps a blog, The Curiosity Chronicles, which explores the meaning of everyday objects and phenomena. A keen educator, he has also taught or coached students from the Royal College of Art in Britain as well as Stanford University and Columbia Business School in the United States.

Mr Bennett studied graphic design at Kingston Polytechnic in London (later renamed Kingston University). After that, he worked as a designer in Batey advertising agency in Singapore, as well as art director of Bloomingdale's, an American department store, before co-founding a New York-based branding agency, nickandpaul. He joined Ideo in 2001.

He lives with his partner, a photographer. The duo, he says, have been on the road for a year now, "exploring the notion of being nomadic".

He believes "the really truly global ideas come from being global".

"I decided that I would put myself into a global context, so that I would start to look at globality personally."

Instead, he says, the Government should be asking: "How do you want to fall in love and what can we do to make that happen?"

It should "host the conversation" without controlling it. The whole point is to let citizens figure out how they want their society and families to look like, and hope-

fully strengthen the intergenerational bond that can be strained when older individuals pressure their younger kin to have children.

In his view, the bigger question Singaporeans should be tackling is: "What does a really broad society start to look like here in the future and what kind of fami-

lies would that have?"

The conversation would set the stage for a pluralistic vision of Singapore society, one with space for singles or unmarried couples if that is how they wish to live their lives.

And it wouldn't matter if the discussion ends in people choosing not to have babies, he says. "You can't ask a citizen to procreate because the country needs it. You have to ask a citizen to live the life he needs or wants to live."

Even when tackling other issues, it's vital for an organisation or government to ask the right question if it wants the public to co-create solutions.

A good question, he explains, is specific enough to understand, but not so focused that it has a definite right or wrong answer.

When Ideo was working with the government of Queensland, Australia, to improve sustainability efforts, for example, it did not ask "what shall we do?", but "how might we better connect food production and consumption?"

A good question inspires action and draws out the ingenuity of the crowd.

For Singapore, which has been trying to grow

its creative economy, a possible question could be: "How can the Government create a patronage of new ideas without having to own them or overly control them?"

He draws a parallel: Art patrons fund artists without dictating their creations. Could Singapore adopt a similar model to grow a creative scene "in a way that makes it feel authentic"?

Again, it's important here for the Government to back away from the ensuing conversation to allow organic solutions to emerge. Attempting to control or limit negative views will only backfire.

He relates an example of a company that once set up a feedback site but closed it down the moment it got a lot of negative comments. "And the worst thing happened, everybody went on a rampage and they had negative feedback coming out of the woodwork in every forum possible."

Besides, there are better ways to deal with negative views. "It is always possible to... ask them: What would you do?"

Ultimately, organisations or governments "have to be a grown-up" about these conversations and roll with the punches.

In Singapore at least, the population is more than ready for these discussions. It "is excited about and wants to be part of this dynamic change".

And the country has "nothing to lose and everything to gain" by diving right in.

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