A Letter From Singapore

Recently, I had the opportunity to visit the Singapore University of Technology and Design (SUTD) and the National University of Singapore (NUS), two very different institutions. SUTD is a highly focused small school just starting its operations in collaboration with the U.S. Massachusetts Institute of Technology. NUS is a large comprehensive university with its roots in the early 20th Century. Both institutions have missions aspiring to society transformation, which one might dismiss as typical highbrow statements—except that Singapore itself is the epitome of society transformation. So one is forced to take such statements seriously.

I had not been in Singapore for a number of years and I was astounded by the many positive transformations this tiny country has achieved. I spent most of my time at SUTD and much of my discussions in both institutions revolved around design education, research, and practice. There are other schools in Singapore some new and some older that also have design dimensions.

I have a few takeaways that I think are relevant to the JMD constituencies.

There is a strong feeling everywhere you look in Singapore that efficiency and transparency in trading, services, and manufacturing creates wealth. This wealth is invested in infrastructure but also in people and new technologies. In these latter areas, design is increasingly recognized as a major contributor to success. Academic and other leaders are increasingly effective in convincing a conservative yet pragmatic government that design, with its links to innovation and its exciting appeal to young students, is more than, say, fashion design, and is now at the core of technological success in the marketplace. This realization gradually translates to very substantial investments in design education.

The Singapore schools are also very impressive in the extent and quality of their global collaborations. A small country must continuously look to the outside to augment its own resources and Singapore does this exceedingly well. Singapore universities have formed partnerships with a significant number of top schools across the globe for both research and education activities. They provide resources with an efficiency that may be hard to match elsewhere and manage the relationships as real partnerships, rather than look like paying for imported knowhow. Several major schools also have their own branch campuses there. While there is a debate whether the local students match those in the home campuses, my sense is that gradually such gaps are closing.

One wonders what is the recipe for such success, and much has been written is the business circles about this. Singapore's transformations have been managed with a firm government hand. This is also a small place where really everybody knows everybody. One's schoolmates are in key decision making positions, reminiscent of U.S. ivy leaguers. Stability requires continuous balancing. This is true in pursuing the design agenda as in anything else.

One may be tempted to look at these developments as a catch-up game for the locals. One may also wonder how long it will take before this catch-up game is reversed. I am sure Singaporeans would dismiss both attitudes. They are perhaps unique in how well they have managed their colonial past and few other successful peoples take success in their stride as they do. Thus, I hope that design research and education stays high on Singapore's agenda.

Panos Y. Papalambros
Editor