Chapter 23
Transformal Role of Product Design in Singapore’s Transition to a Service Economy

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ABSTRACT
Singapore, a city state of 4.8 million people, located at the tip of the Malaysian Peninsula, was founded in 1819, when Sir Stamford Raffles of the East India Company established a trading settlement in Singapore. The meeting point for Chinese, Malays, Indians, Arabs, Europeans and others on their journey through the southern seas, Singapore achieved its initial economic success through international trade as a free port and free market. Given the status of an independent country in 1965, Singapore suddenly found itself in a struggle to survive. It’s small population and scarce resources meant that regional and world markets were larger than the domestic market, presenting the government and its policymakers with distinctive economic challenges and opportunities. This chapter tries to recount the policies and subsequent actions put in place in Singapore from the 1960s till the present, promoting the creative industry, including product design, in order to transform a market dependent economy into a service centered economy. This chapter also discusses if and how such a ‘planned intervention’ played an important role in building up the resources and infrastructure within Singapore and in attracting multi-national companies to locate their R&D and design facilities in Singapore, pointing to where it has succeeded and where it has not.

INTRODUCTION
The modern history of Singapore starts on the 9th August 1965, when Singapore was ‘expelled’ from the federation of Malaysia due to differences between the political establishments within Singapore and the Malaysian government of that time. Overnight, the economic prospects of Singapore looked bleak. Looking at it from a purely Western point of view, Singapore had all the numbers stacked up against them. The literacy rate was just 57% of the small population of around 2.7 million
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with an unemployment rate at double-digit figure. With most of the population involved in mercantile activities, it is surprising to learn that the number of graduates in the country was very low and that most of them studied arts or science, with engineering training almost unheard of by the locals. Almost all products, save some furniture, were being imported for local consumption. Singapore had been used to, up until this time, predominantly British, and to a lesser extent American goods. How did this country, which had only 51,595 (1.9%) persons employed in the manufacturing sector in 1965, grow to attract companies such as Philips, Motorola, Apple, Seagate, Siemens, Matsushita and other global names to set up their operations here? How did it further convince these companies to move up the value of their presence in Singapore from mere manufacturing assembly units to establishing research and development (R&D) and eventually to having product design capabilities as well?

The answer lies in the various carefully planned initiatives taken up by the Government of Singapore from as early as 1961. As a country with a ‘mixed’ multi-ethnic culture without any root to the practice of manufacturing, Singapore was faced with the challenge of reaching ‘instant’ industrialisation.

Being small, policies could be evolved, debated by the various lawmakers and stakeholders and ratified in the Parliament quite rapidly with the implementation almost immediate. These initiatives, again, were not the action of individuals, but were from the various government bodies and boards that the government established on high priority as soon as the country gained its independence or even earlier.

To sustain the initiatives taken earlier, new initiatives are introduced regularly, as the global situation warrants. New agencies and boards are formed to sustain these initiatives keeping Singapore ‘always on the edge’. Associate Professor Suresh Sethi, the Acting Chair of the School of Art, Design and Media at the Nanyang Technological University, Singapore paraphrases this phenomenon in today’s terms as, “fast forward by design”. As the initiatives started getting more and more sophisticated, Singapore came to realise in the late 1980s that design, in general, and product design in particular has to play a key role in sustaining the relevance of Singapore way past the new millennium.

FROM 1965: SETTING THE SCENE

Being a popular air and seaport, it was always easy for Singapore to import goods and products for local consumption. Perishables such as fruits and vegetables were much easier with Malaysia being just across a causeway. However, the products for everyday use such as radio, television, stove, oven, fan, etc., were imported. While Ford Motors and Mercedes Benz had factories assembling cars, the parts used for assembling these cars were completely imported.

At what level was the local expertise in product design and development at this point in Singapore then? Since there was not any manufacture of complete products for mass consumption, the ‘first generation’ engineers had their first encounter of product design in the form of finished technical drawings and plans for parts manufacture and assembly that essentially came from established companies in the United States, Europe and, to a lesser extent, Japan, which were rapidly establishing their manufacturing facilities in Singapore. How was this possible in such a short time?

On the advice of a United Nations expert named Dr. Albert Winsemius, the provincial government of Singapore (still a part of a united Malaysia) established the Singapore Economic Development Board (EDB) in 1961, to convince foreign investors that Singapore was a good place for business. Upon independence, the first Finance Minister of Singapore, Dr. Goh Keng Swee decided to support and hasten EDB’s effort by converting 3000 hectares of swampy land