



KEYNOTE ADDRESS DELIVERED BY MINISTER FOR COMMUNICATIONS AND INFORMATION MR S ISWARAN AT THE ST-SUTD DESIGN INNOVATION FORUM (19 MAR 2021)

Prof Chong Tow Chong, President, SUTD

Sir James Dyson, Founder, Dyson

Mr Brian Yang, Founding Partner, Bjarke Ingels Group

Ladies and Gentlemen

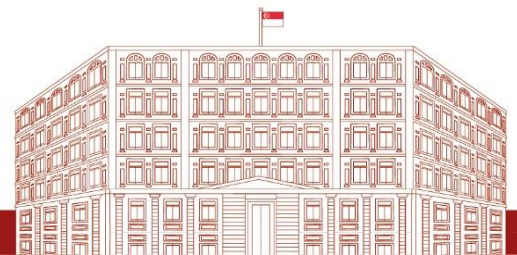
1. Good afternoon. I am pleased to join you at your Design Innovation Forum.
2. Good design is key to achieving good outcomes. The most successful companies distinguish themselves by designing products and services around their customer needs and preferences. Design also prompts a more fundamental question – how can we enhance and elevate the overall experience for end-users?
3. This frame of thinking is not confined to the private sector; the same logic applies to the public and people sectors as well. For the Government, our focus is on the welfare of our citizens. And our brief is clear: to develop human-centric policies and programmes to improve their lives, livelihoods and overall well-being.

Background

4. This is where design thinking comes in. In a recent discussion with The Straits Times,¹ I outlined two perspectives to ‘design thinking’. It is people-centred, seeking to understand what people want and subsequently delivering on their expectations through tailored solutions. It is also a methodological process to tackle challenges, which involves inspiration, ideation and implementation, with iterations to learn and refine.
5. These principles and instincts are not new to Singapore. At a 2018 speech here at SUTD, PM Lee credited “good design thinking” for Singapore’s progress.² Indeed, we have always been open-minded

¹ Interview with Senior Education Correspondent Sandra Davie, published in The Straits Times on 1 Mar 2021 as “*Singapore, a nation by design*”. The article addressed these points in detail, as a response to the question “what is design thinking as applied to government policymaking?”.

² Speech delivered at the SUTD Ministerial Forum on 5 Apr 2018. The relevant excerpt reads: “*Because good design thinking was a key reason for our successful journey from third world to first. With design thinking we*



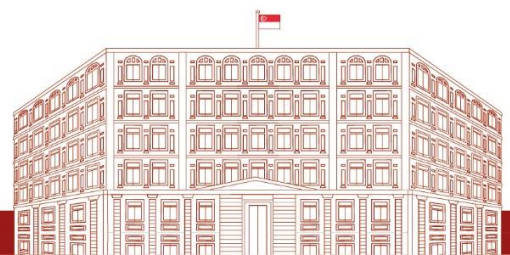
and pragmatic in addressing evolving demands. Rather than be encumbered by ideological baggage, ours is a consultative and practical approach that begins by carefully defining the public policy issues at hand. In designing and implementing solutions, we continually question our assumptions, and are willing to test-bed and pioneer bold ideas.

6. What is new, however, is the operating environment we face today: fast-changing and increasingly complex. The pace of technological advancement is unprecedented. These advancements have made our world more interconnected. Turbulence elsewhere can have unanticipated consequences for economies and societies around the world. COVID-19 is a vivid example. These shifts have introduced intricate, cross-cutting challenges that cannot be solved within traditional domains. The solutions lie in creative and inter-disciplinary responses. We must bring together diverse capabilities and insights, to unlock value and opportunities.
7. With its resolute and consistent focus on placing people and their needs at the heart of problem-solving, design thinking enables us to mount a cogent response in a dynamic environment.
8. In that regard, I wish to make three observations on design thinking from the public sector perspective:
 - a. First, its potential to unlock new and exciting possibilities, especially in the midst of rapid digitalisation;
 - b. Second, its ability to help us serve our people better and build a more inclusive and progressive society; and
 - c. Third, its focus on consultation and partnership, which will be key especially as we emerge from COVID-19.

Unlocking Possibilities amidst Rapid Digitalisation

9. Digitalisation has impelled our enterprises to reconsider their operating premises and business models. They must:
 - a. Adapt to new ways of doing business ;

turned adversities into opportunities, and even strengths. Now, as a first world country, design thinking will be critical for us to transform Singapore again, and to stay an outstanding city in the world."



- b. Compete against disruptors who can leapfrog by leveraging on emerging technologies;
- c. And meet the rising expectations of consumers who increasingly expect customised and quality experiences.

10. Against this backdrop, **design thinking has the potential to unlock new possibilities for businesses, individuals, and Government.** Entities that make effective use of design thinking can re-invent themselves and gain a competitive advantage.

11. Singapore is well-positioned to support businesses in widening their design toolkits. For instance, our Infocomm Media Development Authority (IMDA) launched PIXEL, an innovation space that provides facilities, expertise and programmes for businesses to experiment and build customer-centric digital experiences. At its design thinking sessions, agencies and companies can identify root causes of problems, dive deeper into the challenges and validate their prototypes.

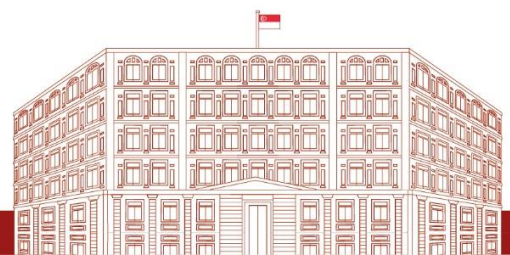
Inclusive Human-Centric Design

12. Secondly, design thinking and its human-centric focus enable us to craft more effective policies and programmes that **improve the welfare of our people.**

13. Let me illustrate with the example of my Ministry's work on digital inclusion. 98% of Singapore households have access to broadband and own Internet-enabled devices. Many have embraced 'digital' in their lives and enjoy the benefits. But there remain segments of our society, such as some of our seniors, who find it difficult to adapt and are understandably anxious about being left behind.

14. The Government is determined to bridge these gaps, so that every individual can reap the digital dividend. We invited those who were concerned to share their concerns with us. Some lacked the technical know-how or access. Others were apprehensive about moving out of their familiar comfort zones. Their feedback helped us refine the "problem statement". We then launched an ideation process, which culminated in the formation of the SG Digital Office. We appointed 1,000 Digital Ambassadors, who are embedded within the community and are well-versed in different languages and dialects, and established 55 SG Digital Community Hubs in the heartlands, to enhance access and comfort for our seniors in their digital journey.

15. At the national level, we are preparing Singapore and Singaporeans for a future invigorated by design. For instance, design thinking will be a core skillset for our workforce. In 2019, the Government



launched the Skills Framework for Design to help professionals move into roles such as creative technologists and service experience designers.

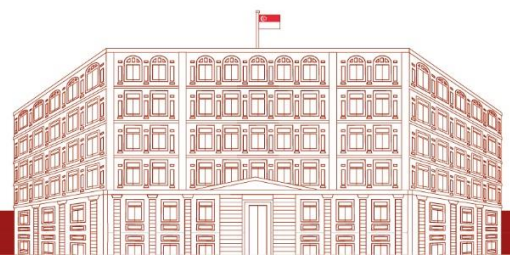
Developing Strong Partnerships

16. But the Government cannot deal with this and other complex challenges alone. We need to draw deeply on diverse interests, networks and capabilities across society, and make it a Whole-of-Singapore effort. Hence my final point – **working with partners to achieve effective outcomes**.

17. One example is the Government’s long-standing partnership with institutes of higher learning (IHLs). James recently remarked that good design requires the interaction of science, technology and design.³ In offering a unique inter-disciplinary education, SUTD exemplifies this by helping students gain mastery over these three core elements. More broadly, our IHLs play important roles in nurturing creativity, critical thinking and inter-disciplinary problem-solving. The recently-appointed Design Education Advisory Committee is one of our latest efforts to foster tighter collaboration between industry and education.

18. The Government also endeavours to work with our people to co-create meaningful solutions to problems of the day. We encourage active citizen participation in all phases of design thinking – from inspiration to ideation to implementation. An example is the Digital for Life Movement, which President Halimah Yacob launched last month in conjunction with the President’s Challenge 2021. It empowers the community to lead ground-up efforts to foster digital inclusion so that all Singaporeans can engage in and enjoy the digital way of life. Similarly, we invite Singaporeans to contribute to the implementation phase, by establishing a two-way communication channel for citizens to convey their needs and feedback, and for agencies to collaborate with stakeholders to review their policies and processes. In this spirit, the Government recently announced 19 Alliances for Action. These are initiatives led by captains of industry, executed in close partnership with the respective Government agencies. The Alliances adopt a “start-up” approach, developing and prototyping ideas within a period of a few weeks, whilst simultaneously engaging potential customers and other stakeholders. These partnerships exemplify “Singapore Together” – an agile model of governance built upon synergies

³ Interview by Sandra Davie published in The Straits Times on 8 Mar 2021 as “*Redesigning engineering education*”. The relevant excerpt reads: “*Good design is not about blindly following what has gone before, it is about forging your own path, being brave, embracing failure, solving problems and creating something new. It is about pioneering. It is certainly not about how a product looks, it is about radically improving upon how it works and the performance that it achieves. This requires the interaction of science, technology and design - so, yes, it can't be separated.*”



between the public, private, and people sectors. They allow us to examine problems through the lens of different ecosystems, and delivers definitive outcomes within defined timelines. This approach will be central to our efforts to Emerge Stronger Together from the COVID-19 crisis.

Conclusion

19. In closing, while we can never be certain about the changes that lie ahead, design thinking offers a valuable, pragmatic methodology to guide our response. Human-centric solutions can convert uncertainty into new possibilities. They can uplift our people's aspirations; and help us move towards a more inclusive and progressive society. And we invite partners across all sectors to join us in shaping this shared future together.

20. Thank you, and I wish you all a fruitful and stimulating forum.

