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Branding Malaysia

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THE Malaysia Design Technology Centre (MDTC) will spearhead the country's efforts to build winning brands and become a leading creative hub in Asia. With its new centre scheduled to open in Cyberjaya in September, MDTC will showcase Malaysia's best and newest in design and branding, as well as some of the world's best.

'MDTC is about building brands and building business. It is a government-private sector initiative to help the small and medium-scale industries (SMIs),' says its president Tan Sri Lim Kok Wing.

Among the centre's tasks will be to establish contact with the global design fraternity and business community to work out collaborations and partnership arrangements. Lim is currently working with several countries including Germany, Italy, Australia and members of Asean.

MDTC comprises two components - the Design Centre houses the events plaza for exhibitions, talent shows and concerts; a branding showcase for concept stores; a design museum; and a business centre, while the other component is the Limkokwing University College of Creative Technology.

The project to create a design-creativity centre in Malaysia started about 12 years ago when Lim established the Limkokwing Institute of Creative Technology. Following its success, MDTC became an extension of the college. Among its roles was to highlight the importance of design and creativity for business.

'Transforming cheap land - a disused mining pool - into a resort is an example of design using creativity,' says Lim. 'It also shows that design and creativity are good for business. I can't think of a successful entrepreneur who isn't creative.'

Does Malaysia need a design-creativity centre like MDTC?

'The world's most successful nations are creativity-driven,' says Lim. 'They have well developed creative industries, own international brands and command premium pricing. They make strategic and long-term investments in design and creative industries.'

Malaysia needs to be more creative and innovative to remain competitive, adds Lim. 'We are a small market, so we have to export. For better margins, we need to have our own brands and move from being original equipment manufacturers (OEMs) to original design manufacturers (ODMs) - that is, taking the product from concept to production - and original brand manufacturers (OBMs). To have our own brands, we must be the brains, the owner of the ideas.'

The idea of MDTC to function as a business catalyst came during a meeting with Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad in 1996, when they discussed the idea of developing Malaysian brands that would sell around the world.

Lim says training is important in producing 'thinkers, researchers, writers, people who create things'. Hence, the two components of MDTC - the college, which serves as the incubator for training and enterprise development, and the Design Centre for brand-related activities.

MDTC is essentially about branding Malaysia, adds Lim. Switzerland, for instance, is known for precision engineering, Italy for luxury goods, Germany for the fastest trains. All have very strong creative industries, are known for high quality products and good designs, and export worldwide.

The centre thus has a big integrative role to play by linking

manufacturers to designers, industries to training and R&D facilities, creative industries to government agencies, and between various disciplines of design and creative industries.

`Malaysia is a latecomer in brand-building. Japan started in the 1950s and South Korea in the 1970s. Both are now successful. Taiwan started 30 years ago. If we leapfrog now, we can do it in 10 years, but we must get serious,' says Lim.

A case in point is the shoe design industry, which Lim says is lethargic. While these mostly family-owned SMIs produce about 90 million pairs of shoes for export, their design capacity is very low. `Most are designed overseas. So we're dependent on ideas and thinking from other countries,' he says.

`However, we can leapfrog because the same technologies are now available to everybody. One way of doing it is by adoption and adaptation. Japan did that, and now, China is doing well.'

Lim says MDTC will help Malaysia build its competitiveness via innovative design and effective branding, a quality-conscious industry and society, and a vibrant design culture and creative industries.

The International Design Museum of MDTC will showcase, for instance, the best of Japan and South Korea. Similarly, the Malaysian Design Museum will display a selection of very good Malaysian products to inspire others to work towards such excellence.

To ensure that MDTC works, Lim intends to turn it into a lifestyle and inspirational destination with year-round activities to attract people with creative ideas - those who `think outside the box'. There will be talent shows for fashion designers, hair designers, musicians, singers, people from the film production industry, etc.

`These activities are often dismissed as frivolous but they will be the catalysts for the design-creativity centre. They will help create industries, jobs and wealth. The developed countries have huge, resourceful creative industries and we intend to build that in Malaysia,' Lim asserts.