Let’s create street buzz to showcase talent

By Shashank Nigam

Here is a quiz. Try to guess where you are:
You see a young girl, less than 6 years old, singing the most popular Beatles classics in her own style.
Her mother is on the drums, her dad on the guitar. The small crowd around them is mesmerised by the young talent’s voice and her confidence.

Just around the street, you see teenage guys enticing a crowd of almost a hundred, with their nifty breakdancing skills.

After an engrossing show of swift moves, and many headspins and body twists later, they reveal that the crowd may pay as they wish; the donation will go towards their university education.

Just then, you hear the sound of a beautiful violin. As you walk towards the sweet music, you realise that it is the same old Chinese man playing the violin as he did the day before.

He does it every day for at least four hours, at the exact same spot.

So where exactly are you?
1) A circus
2) An arts festival
3) Ang Mo Kio Central

Most of you may have chosen one of the first two options.

But what if the third option becomes a reality?

The scene I just described is not from a circus or an arts festival, but Harvard Square, in Boston, US.

What I described above takes place every evening, where people have as much fun performing as they do seeing their efforts applauded.

There is also an area near the train station exit called “The Pit”. Its arena-like appearance attracts skateboarders and, more generally, teens from surrounding neighbourhoods exuding counter-culture influences.

Right behind “The Pit”, an outdoor cafe features always-busy tables for chess players, including an old stalwart, with his ever-present “Play the Chessmaster” sign.

All these, with a backdrop of world-renowned shopping, dining and historical attractions, make a compelling cultural “hub” for the locals as well as the tourists.

Can you imagine if such a scene were to take place in Singapore? Even if a fraction of the cultural buzz at Harvard Square is replicated in Toa Payoh Central, or Bedok, or any housing estate, the Singapore Tourism Board will probably have to do much less to get tourists here.

Moreover, such a lively cultural scene would encourage the locals to step out and play their part, be it by just watching and encouraging performers or by displaying their talents on the street.

Just like free trade zones in China, the Government should create “free performance zones”, where people are able to perform without an official licence or by paying a fee.

Just imagine the incredible amount of traditional arts and culture activities that have the potential to surface.

Some of such performances can already be seen, with the breakdancers in the underpass at the Esplanade, and the Singapore Management University concourse.

Unfortunately, there have been calls to curb these groups as they are “unsightly”.

But one just needs to observe them for a while to see the great effort they put in.

At the end of the day, no amount of “orders” to create a cultural scene can match the energy and passion on display if individuals themselves step forward to showcase their art.

To encourage them to do this, all the authorities need to do is create an environment suitable for a happening cultural scene.

Maybe giving this “movement” a name will get things done. How about calling it the “Harvardisation of Bedok”, for example?

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