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## When life gives you lemons

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OPPOSITE  
ALEX FUNG WITH  
SOME OF HIS  
JUICERS

# WHEN LIFE GIVES YOU LEMONS - SQUEEZE THEM!

Alex Fung, Principal of the Hong Kong Design Institute, has devoted his life to finding new ways to be creative. As he presided over the launch of *Signed*, he decided he wanted a publication that would break through boundaries.



DANIEL JEFFREYS

IT'S EARLY ON a Friday morning and Alex Fung is already proving that his middle name should be "kinetic". He moves at speed around his office, laying his fingers on dozens of the objects that populate his bookshelf, searching for the one that will help him to make a point about how design can do more to serve the community.

"We can't make things and forget they exist," he says, balancing his fingers on a custom-made iPad cover he had just collected from Lane Crawford. "Everybody looks at a given object in a different way. That's what makes design such an interesting challenge."

Fung is famous for making people look at things from unusual angles. His design manual *Creative Tools* puts great emphasis on breaking rules, overcoming fixed mindsets and getting rid of assumptions. He is fond of saying things like, "if the only tool you have is a hammer, then every problem looks like a nail." Then there is his lemon juicer collection, which must be one of the largest in the world.

"I can't remember where I put the Philippe Starck one," he says as he begins to rummage in one of six large boxes by the side of his desk that formerly held Apple computers but now house hundreds of bubble-wrapped juicers. "It's a cliché but, like everything Starck does, it's very representative of a certain kind of innovation."

He finally lays his hands on the Starck one, unearthing it from deep within a set of juicers that all seem to have been made from fluorescent pink plastic. Starck's version looks like a spider with exceptionally long legs. It seems like a perfect icon for thinking outside normal boundaries, because most juicers are short and squat.

"Creative thought is about making new mental patterns," he says. "It's inspired by unanswered questions and redefining values or relationships."



And that's why Fung has the lemon juicer collection, which, since he is an unconventional thinker, has hardly anything to do with extracting lemon juice. The collection has a much bigger role as a means of squeezing new ideas out of people who thought their creativity might have run dry. At least once a year, Fung takes his entire collection out and holds a "juicer symposium", during which participants are first asked to use the juicers for their intended purpose. After that, everyone has to come up with a juicer design that looks nothing like the ones in Fung's collection.

*Creative Tools* has a pull-out chart featuring 101 ways to squeeze a lemon, running from getting a shark and using its jaws to deploying mouse traps, cogs, steam irons, a drawer and folding chairs. Fung is big on creating massive lists as a means of inspiring creativity.

"The first step is to list ideas without evaluating them," he says. "The first 20 to 30 ideas will be things we're already aware of and may not be very useful. The bigger the list, the greater the probability we will come across an original insight that synthesises two existing ideas."

Fung insists that students try his 101 ideas approach when they are brainstorming, arguing that it's the only way to generate truly unusual thoughts.

"Such a long list forces people to shift their viewpoint, so they imagine how somebody might approach the problem if they were less inhibited by conventions," he says. "Often, the last set of ideas in the 101 is the one that has the most-surprising content and produces significant conceptual advances."

One particular viewpoint Fung is anxious to shift is the international perception of the HKDI, which he believes does not yet reflect the quality of courses it offers, nor the calibre of the graduates it produces.

"We have a world-class facility, nobody has any doubt about that," he says, as we ride up the giant escalator that welcomes students and visitors to the new Tiu Keng Leng campus, which opened during the current academic year. "What people are less aware of is the world-class design education we provide. Through initiatives like *Signed*, we will change that."

Fung's ambition is for the HKDI to take its place in the premier league of design schools, rubbing shoulders in the pages of design magazines, design fairs and design school rankings with the likes of New York's New School, the Fashion Institute of Technology and Central Saint Martins in London.



ABOVE  
ALEX FUNG IN HIS  
OFFICE AT HKDI

"Hong Kong has the resources and the talent pool, in the form of our students, to be the best of the best in many different fields," he says. "Our alumni already include many design talents who are doing world-class work, and the more that happens the more the HKDI brand will become familiar in international design markets."

Fung continues to add to his lemon juicer collection, despite the large number he has already acquired. He sees collecting as an essential quality of a good designer.

"Collecting is a passionate activity," he says, lining up a half-dozen of his favourite juicers across the top of his desk. "A collection arouses memories and generates new meanings, and it enhances our discernment in ways that lead to creativity."

And that's Fung's life mission, to bring creativity to a world that sometimes seems intent on turning its back on new ideas, to advance the agenda of design at a time when there are so many issues that call out for design solutions – like an ageing population and the shortage of natural resources. And if he has to make a few quarts of lemonade along the way, so be it. ☺

« CREATIVE  
THOUGHT  
IS ABOUT  
MAKING  
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MENTAL  
PATTERNS »

