



INSIDE

- Mobile wallets go global > p22-23
- Peso-yuan trade lifts ties > p24

Making city landscapes more playful

Entrepreneur uses technology to improve urban wellness through fun-filled daily interactions with human-centered 'street furniture, buildings'

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What makes a good city? It is a question that young Chinese-born Australian entrepreneur Steven Bai is often asked.

"I often quote Danish architect and urban design consultant Jan Gehl who said, 'a good city is like a good party ... People stay longer than really necessary because they are enjoying themselves,'" he told the 2018 Sydney China Business Forum on Oct 22.

Presented by The University of Sydney China Studies Centre in collaboration with The University of Sydney Business School & Charles Perkins Centre, this year's forum had the theme, "China's healthy cities: opportunities and challenges for Australian businesses".

Bai's address during the lunch break provided a refreshing diversion from academic discourse earlier in the day on China's urbanization and health.

As the planet becomes more urbanized, Bai believes cities should be "fun and immersive" places to live and work. He uses technology to make urban environments more "human-centered" by making "street furniture and buildings" more engaging.

By street furniture, Bai refers to everyday public features such as park benches, bus shelters, billboards, light poles, telephone booths, trash bins and public washrooms.

Speaking to *China Daily Asia Weekly*, the University of Sydney architecture and design graduate explained his vision for making the world a better place with what he calls "persuasive technologies". That is, using technology in environments where people work and live to help them to make better choices and have better experiences.

"I want to change people's everyday behavior by creating experiences

that are useful, meaningful, playful and memorable," said the cofounder and CEO of Sencity Corp.

He describes Sencity as an "interactive experience suite" that had its early beginnings in a shared studio in Sydney, where Bai and his university friends would gather to brainstorm, coming up with quirky "urban intervention" ideas to improve everyday urban wellness and encourage playful interactions in public spaces.

Sencity set out to investigate the role of design-led innovation and technology in shaping, and even changing, living experiences in everyday environments. Before long, the gatherings at his studio turned into meetings with head honchos of large multinational corporations and international festivals.

Sencity, now based in New York City, has witnessed a series of collaborations with the fashion, art and technology industries, with successful projects across Shanghai, New York and Sydney.

Increasingly, Bai's company and cross-disciplinary team are being recognized as 'urban magicians', fast gaining traction internationally with their talent for turning fantastic ideas into practical reality.

"In most cities, street furniture and buildings are rather dull and uninteresting. They are not attractive," he said.

"What we aim to do at Sencity is figure out ways to make them attractive and to improve people's lives. Basically, reimagine cities as operating systems."

One of his first projects while still at university was the TetraBIN, which first appeared at Sydney's Vivid Festival in 2014.

Bai and fellow student Sam Johnson took council trash cans, which form part of the city's street furniture, and turned them into interactive Tetris-style games.

Tetris is a tile-matching puzzle video game, originally designed and programmed by Russian game



Children playing with an interactive wall created by Sencity Corp in Shanghai. The company uses technology to make urban environments "fun and immersive" places. PHOTOS PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY ASIA WEEKLY



Steven Bai, cofounder and CEO of Sencity.

designer Alexey Pajitnov and first played in June 1984.

Each time a piece of trash was put in the bin, it was detected and a Tetris-like shape was generated in LED lights, which played to the previous piece that was generated. This 'gamification' element so engaged people that hundreds of children waited in line at Vivid to use the bin.

Bai does make the point that the TetraBIN has come a long way since 2014. "Back then it was a prototype. The TetraBIN of today is a product of Sencity and much more advanced," he said.

As well as making people think more about the garbage they produce and the environment around them, the TetraBIN has become Bai's calling card. And it helps explain his "dream" — taking something we all use every day and turning it into something exciting.

"That is very powerful," Bai said. "By using technology in the urban space, we not only make life fun, but we can also get across important messages at the same time ... make people think and help ease tension."

Another one of Bai's projects was a wall in Sydney augmented with technology that responded to movement.

"This was right in the middle of the CBD (central business district)," he said.

"Here people actually stopped and did things ... interacting with the light. It was amazing. You even had city people in suits stopping to have a go.

"I spoke to one guy who went home, got some speakers and came down and danced with it," Bai said.

"The point is you can do this with almost anything and it makes you feel good.

"Walk into a telephone box and it is dull and featureless. It doesn't make you feel good. Walk in and it

reacts with light and color, and you start to feel good.

"That is the challenge. That is how you make cities livable and fun places to be."

Born on the border between China and Russia, Bai spent the early part of his childhood in Dalian, in Northeast China's Liaoning province, and Beijing, before he came to Australia as an exchange student when he was in Year 10. Bai said he "liked the experience (lifestyle and education) so much" that he stayed, studying architecture and design at Sydney University.

Today, he spends a lot of time in New York and Shanghai where his work has become well known. His cross-cultural background has helped shape his creative vision on how to strategically design for different cultures and demographics.

Deeply involved with startup businesses, Bai has helped several startups from a creative perspective.

He has also been contracted to work with some of the world's largest technology companies, on multimillion-user projects across mobile and tablet, desktop, internet protocol television (IPTV), in-flight entertainment systems, the internet of things, and urban inventions.