The Statesman

Creativity, innovation and the art business

CREATIVITY inspires innovation and innovation is crucial in the development of business ideas, strategic planning, and product design. It plays a vital role in all levels of businesses of any kind, forming the crucial gap between theory and effective practice, but the possibilities creative thinking can offer have been hugely underestimated.

Facilitating creative potential is a skill many people find difficulty in, therefore allowing the business forum to act as an outlet for imagination and innovation is sometimes a prospect ignored by managers. Creativity is a skill we should be encouraged to explore at a young age in schools but in Ghana art, music and drama make up very little of school curriculums. Natural talent that many individuals are born with is being suppressed by a system and a society that discourages creativity and pursuit of a career in the creative industries.

It is naïve to think all children grow up with the dream of becoming a doctor, lawyer or the president; some house alternative abilities which should be equally encouraged and valued. The problem is that creative industries in Ghana are undervalued and entirely overlooked as a possible career path; this in turn is the result of a society that undervalues artistic ability and ignores the benefits of such value.

Innovation is the backbone to every successful business. The most prosperous industries are products of the development of new product, brand and concept design, yet our schools do not encourage the skills that expand creativity in later life. The case is the same in many African countries, whereas creative industries amass a vast amount of money in Western countries like Britain and the US. The most famous case recently can be cited as British contemporary artist Damien Hurst selling a piece named the diamond geezer for $100 million, and although this is an exceptional case, artists are often able to sustain high incomes through work as creative producers. The art industry has become an international medium for freedom of expression, visual culture and the archiving of a nation's social and cultural history, as well as a big business, generating significant amounts of capital for the artist and branching industry employees.

Art however, has not received its deserved recognition in Ghana, yet the phenomenon of large scale trade of African art on the global market is happening in almost everywhere but Africa itself. On a global scale, the business in the trading of African paintings and artifacts are financially benefiting Western countries on a huge scale, whilst being undervalued in the country of their origin. Many of the foremost cultural producers in the world are Ghanaian, a fact that immerged in the world press during Ghana's 50th Independence Anniversary, but they remain virtually unknown in their home country. In the international press, many Ghanaian artists living abroad, including popular architects, painters, sculptures and contemporary artists, are highly celebrated for their work and advertise Ghana as a centre for cultural excellence, gaining credibility, recognition and fortune for their work (see front page feature).

Creativity and visual beauty has always been a vital element of Ghanaian life as part of the culture and community, emerging from a culture of very artistic people: creativity in fabric design, traditional clothes, hair styles, music, dance, carvings and sculptures integrate the society on an everyday basis and can be seen everywhere you go. From the way women arrange fruit for sale on the roadside to perfectly aligned nuts balanced on the head of a street seller, creativity and visual luxury is everywhere, and it should be documented in Ghana, it should be valued. Instead it is being appreciated by foreigners through press houses such as *The New York Times Magazine* and the *BBC*, and serving as a cash cow for the art movement in Europe and the US, amongst other countries. Architecture illustrates Ghana's history and its people's talent. James Town for example is one of the earliest communities in the country and is an important connection between Britain and Ghana, a breathing, living, archive of colonisation and the transition to independence. Why has James Town and the extraordinary architecture there not been preserved as a national heritage site? Ghana needs to value its own artistic documentation of an important complex social history and a beautiful visual culture before it changes altogether and create a marketplace for the trade of local art within Ghana, as well as regulating the trade of Ghanaian art in the international market. Ignoring, or not paying enough attention to our heritage is definitely not a good idea for the national kitty.

Sheikh up

The cartel is back in control of the oil price—for the time being

BY BOOSTING their output of oil for the first time in two years, the members of the Organisation of the Petroleum Exporting Countries this week finally signalled that the oil price, at nearly $80 a barrel, has gone high enough. This time last year, by trimming its output, OPEC indicated that it did not want the price to fall below $60 a barrel. Will the cartel be able to keep the oil price confined between this lofty floor and even higher ceiling—and if so, what is the outlook for the world's energy supply from OPEC's new penthouse?

Abdullah al-Badri, OPEC's secretary-general, explained that the group had decided to open the taps at its summit in Vienna out of compassion for cash-strapped drivers around the world. "Our message to consumers is that we care," he told the press corps. But consumers who recall the earlier part of this decade, when the price vacillated between $20 and $30, are presumably not overwhelmed by the cartel's compassion.

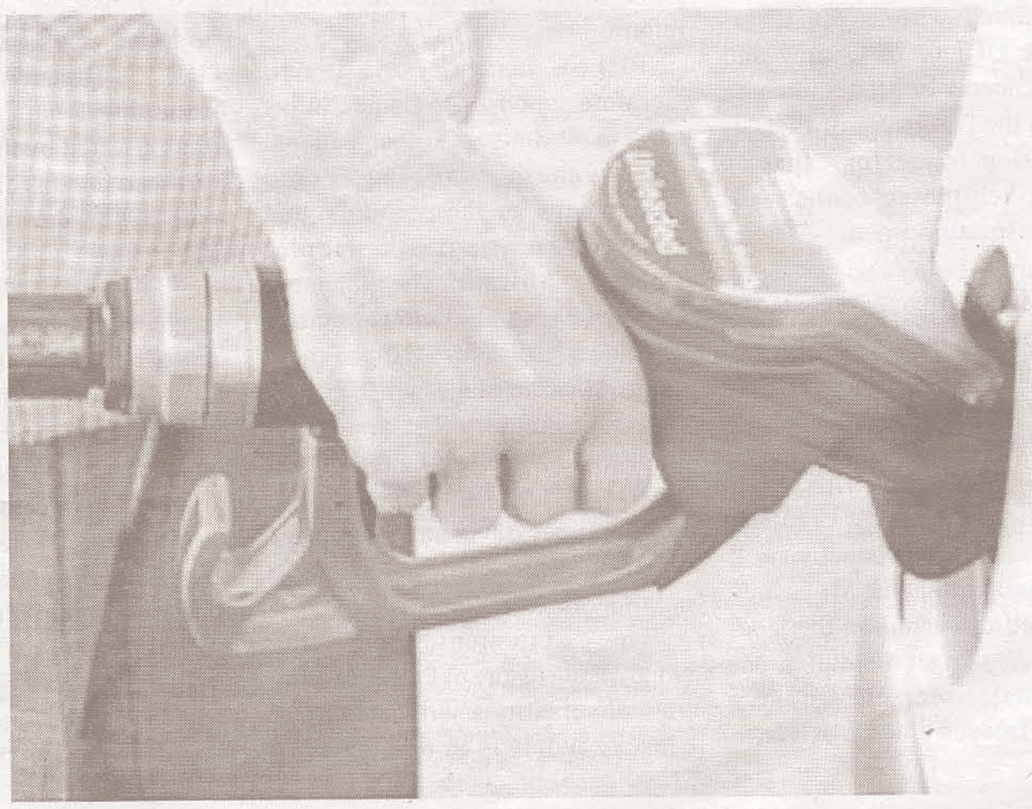
The difference between now and then is OPEC's discovery that booming places like China have a seemingly unquenchable demand for oil. Oil producers, including those in OPEC, struggled to keep up. Prices rose, but demand kept on increasing too. By last summer, OPEC was already pumping as much oil as it could, and markets were fearful that hurricanes in the Gulf of Mexico or a political storm in the Persian Gulf would lead to shortages. The oil price duly rose to over $77 a barrel.

When those fears dissipated, it became clear that there was enough oil to go around after all. But by then, OPEC had developed a taste for $70 oil. So it cut production to stop prices from falling too far. When the oil price reached a new record of $78 a barrel last month, it was thanks as much to OPEC's diminished output as to runaway demand. The cartel has now proved that it has enough discipline to prop up prices by restraining supply if need be, and also enough spare capacity to temper prices when they rise too high for its liking. In other words, OPEC is back in control of the oil price.

This contains a grain of good news. Had a Katrina-like hurricane or a conflict between America and Iran destroyed lots of rigs last year, there would have been no one capable of compensating for the lost production by pumping more. Now, at least, oil consumers can go cap in hand to the likes of Saudi Arabia, as Samuel Bodman, America's energy secretary, did before the OPEC meeting.

But for all Mr al-Badri's magnanimous talk and Mr Bodman's pleading, do not expect OPEC to grant the world's drivers much respite. Several of its members, including Algeria, Iran and Venezuela, argued against higher quotas on the grounds that global financial jitters and an incipient economic slowdown in America might lead to lower demand for oil, just as OPEC was increasing supply. In the end, the cartel resolved to raise its output by only 500,000 barrels per day, or less than 2%, although the increase comes in addition to the 900,000 b/d its members are already pumping in excess of their quotas. The extra supply did not dent the price at all; in fact, the oil price hit new records following OPEC's announcement.

Ignorance of the law

That should worry OPEC's hawks more than it appears to. They seem to think that the world economy's ebullient growth over the past few years in the face of rapidly rising oil prices proves that it has developed immunity to oil shocks. The Chinese economy, for one, consumes more oil relative to its size than America's, but it is still galloping along. Americans, for that matter, show no inclination to buy less petrol even at prices over $3 a gallon.

Yet the laws of economics have not suddenly been repealed. Dearer oil will cut economic growth. Over the longer term, consumers respond to higher prices by driving more efficient cars and substituting other fuels for petrol. America's romance with gas-guzzling sports-utility vehicles appears to be fading and its affair with biofuels is ever more passionate. At the same time high prices are bound to constrain demand, and unpredictable economic growth and Middle Eastern politics make the future of both demand and supply uncertain. OPEC may appear to have regained control over the oil price, but it's not likely to last.