

Headline **High-tech tinkerers on the rise**
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High-tech tinkerers on the rise

From building robots to creating software apps, a DIY movement is taking root in Singapore

■ BY GRACE CHUA

REUSE. Repair. Repurpose.

This is the rallying cry of a growing number of DIY enthusiasts here who put hands and mind together to make robots, phone chargers or 3-D printers from scratch.

Others plug into the challenge of solving problems by writing software applications in 24-hour group hackathons.

Here, hacking refers not to cybercrime but white-hat hacking – tapping into programming smarts to create legal applications.

Engineer Limor Fried, founder of DIY electronics kit company Adafruit, explained to Wired magazine recently that the DIY movement has taken off because of easy access to cheap technology and clear instructions online.

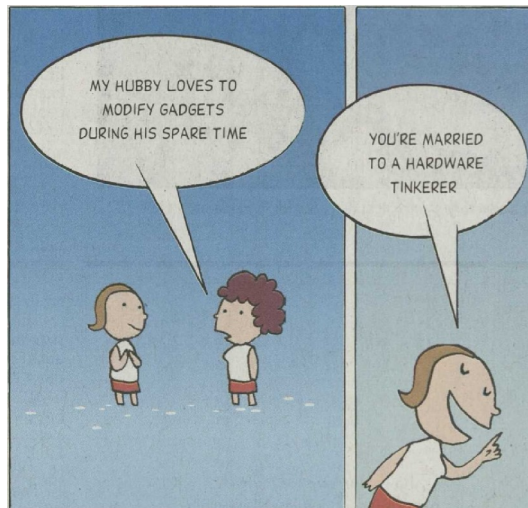
She noted too that society is at a “sweet spot” where people want to make things for themselves and their friends.

And in this pursuit of forming and transforming, throwing things away is out but repairing and reconfiguring them is in.

“I end up hogging stuff and my wife gets fed up,” said engineer Benjamin Khoo, 34, whose tiny storeroom in his flat is filled with spare parts.

Tinkering with spare parts may be a spare-time activity but it could also yield new commercially valuable technologies.

“Yes, it is a hobby, but in the same way that ham radio was a hobby – people were just experimenting with packet radio. But that led to Wi-Fi and cell-



phones,” said Ms Fried in an interview with the magazine last month.

Locally, tech consultant Adrianna Tan, 25, believes Singapore has a critical mass of people dabbling in tech projects – at least software ones.

“Although we’ve had grants and start-ups for some time now, I think South-east Asia has finally started to emerge from the tech backwaters to where it is now – increasingly prominent.”

Singapore benefits from its location too, she added – it is a good base from which to reach South-east and East Asia.

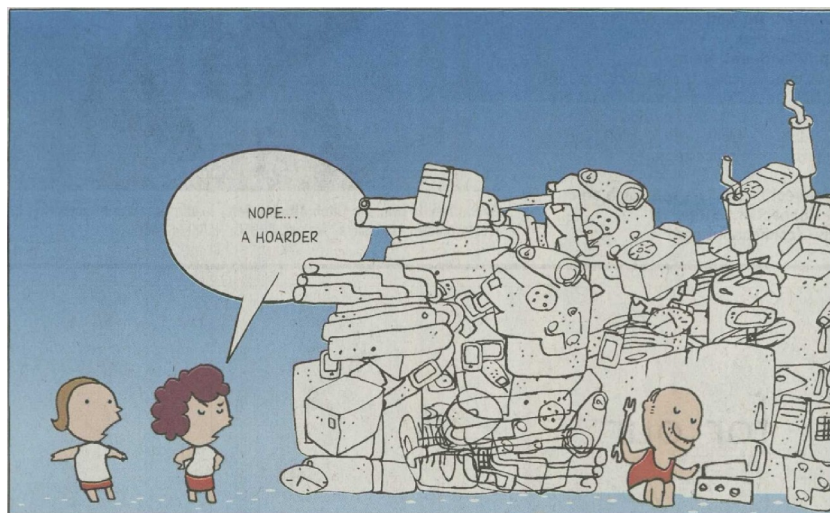
For example, Facebook co-founder Eduardo Saverin and Mr Derek Sivers, founder of indie-music site CD Baby, are based here and add to the local tech community.

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ST ILLUSTRATION: ADAM LEE

Hardware tinkerers based here have produced a range of items from things as simple as a toothbrush holder to a standing fan made by cobbling together five large computer fans.

In 2008, a team of robotics enthusiasts even got to the final round of a defence robotics competition here, fielding their \$8,000 homemade robot against university teams with \$300,000 machines.

Elsewhere, the DIY movement is also on a roll.

The US magazine Make, launched in 2005, began organising a DIY event called Maker Faire in 2006, and this has since spread to Britain and several US cities.

Here, hackathons have been held at

Nanyang Technological University.

The SuperHappyDevHouse "hackfest" and party, an event that started in Silicon Valley, will be held on May 14 at multipurpose space The Pigeonhole on Duxton Road.

DIY enthusiasts are also flocking to Hackerspace, a clubhouse for tinkerers and hackers in a Bussorah Street shophouse.

Since its inception in late 2009, Hackerspace now has a 300-strong mailing list and has grown from an initial 24 members to more than 60.

They pay between \$32 and \$512 for using the space, from a casual basis to permanent access seven days a week.

But the path to DIY nirvana in Singa-

pore is not without some potholes.

The country does not have readily available tooling shops to custom-make parts and few homes have a garage space to tinker in.

Shipping in parts from overseas is also prohibitively expensive for some.

Still, the biggest obstacle to the DIY movement's growth here is the local attitude to consumption.

As Mr Khoo put it: "We have a 'use and throw' culture. Sometimes because the DIY output is not as 'sweet' ('attractive' in Hokkien) as the commercial thing, people would rather not make their own items."

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Additional reporting by Lester Kok

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