A true radical thinker, Tim Smit has been at the helm of two projects in Cornwall that have challenged and changed popular perceptions. The Lost Garden of Heligan and The Eden Project not only inspired ordinary people with their stories but, as social enterprises, have given a considerable boost to the Cornish economy.

Tim, a former composer and producer of a number of platinum and gold records, gave up on the music industry at the height of his career to follow another calling. In this article, Tim explains the impetus behind The Eden Project and why social enterprise could be the next revolution in business.
When I moved to Cornwall in 1987, I saw a huge swath of dereliction down the central spine of the county where the clay industry was in significant decline - people would actually be talking about this industry as if they hoped it would disappear. Intrigued, I went to see an abandoned quarry just outside the town of St Blazey and thought to myself: “If this was in the United States, it would be considered prime development land!”

I saw this as an opportunity to give the jolt necessary to the economy and to inspire the population.

My experience of restoring the Lost Gardens of Heligan (also in Cornwall) had shown me that, by using a new narrative style, it was possible to introduce an awful lot of people to a subject from which they had previously been excluded simply by the language that had been used to describe it. We realised that, by making it very accessible and telling the human stories about Heligan, ordinary men and women became engaged.

For example, we restored all the potting sheds and working buildings. People would come in and get all misty eyed, as if some folk memory from long ago was being stirred by seeing it. We became the most visited garden in Britain and, two years ago, were voted a ‘national treasure’ and the UK’s favourite garden by Gardener’s World.

It was precisely because I knew nothing of how gardens when I started with Heligan, that I was able to compose the coherent story I wanted to tell. Rather than an individual series of restoration projects to grow plants, I was interested in putting the whole tapestry of it together - I used to joke that I wanted the whole opera and not the greatest hits album.

I noticed that an awful lot of people were very moved by the productive gardens. on talking to them, I discovered that there was something primal about the sense of plenty around them, which affected them in a way that they couldn’t quite express, but was obviously important.

Out of the Heligan experience, I started to think about how great it would be to have a place that, metaphorically speaking, had the role of being a lost civilisation that actually focused the mind on our dependence on the natural world. We wanted to create a place that was shorn of the normal branding of the everyday world, so that it could be read in a more serene way. I wanted people to start to think about what they might need to do in order to survive and eventually live off the ingredients of the natural world. That is when I had the idea of the Eden Project. I’ve been accused of being a ‘visionary’ for thinking of it but I must say that I have yet to meet a 12-year-old in any school who has not dreamt of building something like the Eden Project.

The building of Eden had two great attractions. One was to see whether I could enter the world of high spec construction, science and engineering, and persuade professional people to get excited. The second was to see whether I could find the words that would enable public servants to make decisions based on whether they believed it was a great idea - rather than whether it ticked the right boxes.

A project like Eden, by its very nature and size, would never tick the boxes because, starting right at base level, the planning permission for the area would not allow anything of that scale. So, we had to persuade the regional government to waive the rules of planning. And it was a complete joy, when you start a dialogue that says, “Wouldn’t it be great to have written on your tombstone that you had worked on something like this?”... and you just see people light up.

The secret to getting it done was very simple storytelling. People can start to imagine the part they can play in it and why they are important and how, without them, it wouldn’t happen. They were able to take a bit of ownership of the idea as it developed.

One of the things that people, whether they are in the corporate world or public service, hate is that many of the things that excite and energise them seem to be talked about in a monetised way. As opposed to another language which is about their own personal inspiration... and not about money.

In my view, this is the fundamental thing to which we must return. It is not that everything is wrong, but an awful lot of things do not have a clear value system running through them - a value system which says that a curious, engaged, kind and generous mind is capable of all sorts of things.

Tim believes that social enterprise could be the most important innovation in capitalism for 200 years. He does not suggest that the big businesses of today should transform themselves into social enterprises, but he does seriously believe that, within 25 years, many big businesses will be social enterprises.

The issue though is that the concept of social enterprise is still not well understood and, to some, it has even been perceived to have been set up in conflict with corporatism. This needn’t be so.
Another criticism laid at its door is that it does not make profits and that, according to law, a public limited company must maximise its profits. That is also not a matter for discussion.

Henry Ford actually started the idea of ‘social enterprise’ when he built better quality accommodation around his factory to prevent exhaustion. Whilst, to him, it was clear that increased productivity from a fresh workforce would clearly drive profits, he was sued because he couldn’t prove it in court. He was therefore forbidden to continue investment and had to take a cut in his own stake in order to pay back what he had spent.

Politicians also help to confuse the message, perhaps because they don’t understand business. They talk glibly about it in a library hush as if it is a just new model for working which enables communities to create companies in which people, who might otherwise find it hard to get jobs, can get employment.

It is also not ‘CSR’. An awful lot of this stuff about CSR and everything else, which provides a pattern of humanity or concern across limited companies, has no value, other than additional shareholder value and, perhaps, competitive advantage.

To set the record straight, my definition of social enterprise is a corporate structure that takes account of (or even has) shareholders, as opposed to using the wishy-washy term ‘stakeholders’, but has shareholders that include the community of interested parties all around the sphere of its operations.

A SOCIAL REVOLUTION

As new shapes evolve out of this so-called miasma of social enterprise, I would like to think that a number of very successful business people move into this sphere, recognising that the wealth they can create out of combining a lot of community interests, will actually enable them to meet their own material desires, while at the same time being of community benefit. I think this is something that many people in the corporate world are very hungry for.

Imagine that you set up an insurance company which states that, if you are under 25, you can still be insured as a driver for £500, but you have to pay all the costs on the damage of your vehicle. The real prize is that, if you don’t make any claims, a percentage of the profits of the insurance company are given back to them at Christmas. Now, if you get 100,000 leading to several million people getting back something if you didn’t think that it was wrong, but a lot of things don’t have a clear value system running through them.

This is happening in the commercial world in certain areas like the Gramine Bank, which is described as a social enterprise, but is actually a limited company. It just has some social principles that are brilliantly honed mechanisms to encourage the poor to pay back their debt.

Gramine Bank set up Gramine Phones. The way that works is that all the self-help groups who took out loans are offered the chance to buy a telephone at 10 per cent more than it costs Gramine to make it. They can then rent their phone out to other people and make money out of that phone.

And, if they sell a phone to somebody else, they get 5 per cent of that 10 per cent profit to themselves. A true social enterprise!

THE EDEN PROJECT

Opened to the public in March 2001, The Eden Project is an eco-tourist attraction which mimics the eco-climates of the rainforest and Mediterranean.

Established as one of the Landmark Millennium Projects to mark the year 2000 in the UK, the garden was built in a disused clay quarry near Bodelva, Cornwall. Inspired by its natural surroundings, the garden consists of three biomes which take their design from bubbles allowing the buildings to settle on the uneven surface of the mine.

The biomes also have the distinction of being the largest conservatory in the world, as named by the Guinness Book of World Records. In fact, the Tower of London would fit in the Rainforest Biome.

As many of its functions and designs are borrowed from nature, the Eden Project is best described as a global garden that is constantly evolving and changing. During the first two months of construction, it rained every day resulting in 43 gallons of rain being drained into the pit. Due to this inclement weather, engineers came up with a subterranean drainage system that now collects all the water on the site. This water is used to irrigate plants, flush toilets and provides half the water needs of the Eden Project.

A true social enterprise, the Eden Project has invested £500 million into the Cornish economy - more than all the EU subsidies to the area combined.

It is also a matter for discussion. The network of leaders

The key to any kind of change or accepting something new is leadership. To be the best leader possible, you must first recognise that you’re not the best leader there has ever been. The secret is that everybody around you should know that you are doing something because of your love of life, and that you wouldn’t be suggesting doing something if you didn’t think that it was BEING THE BEST LEADER POSSIBLE

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going to be great. This really helps to get people’s attention. Even if you’re talking about something whacky, if they know that that’s what moves you, then they’ll give it a bit more air time than otherwise.

I manage time like Genghis Khan. Why have a meeting that takes an hour because everybody feels that, to give respect to the meeting, it should last an hour, when it could have lasted five minutes and you could have made love in the other 55? I’m making an extreme point, but I have learned that, if you say to people you can have five minutes now or an hour at the end of the week, people learn how to get very important points across very quickly. One of the great frustrations for clever, smart people is they don’t know how to be clever and smart without being arrogant and rude. Whereas, when people start to think about the fact that you are smart enough to take it in five minutes, because your actions subsequently prove that you took it in, then they get relaxed with it. And you then find the time that you need to be excited about what you’re doing. A ‘meetings’ culture can kill you.

However, a leader should break all these rules when a member of the team is feeling personally unhappy; then you must give as much time to make them feel happy again. The people that are working with you need to know that they, as people, are really important to you. Take the time to look into people’s eyes, look at whether they are happy, whether they are content.

People will go anywhere with you if they feel you are looking out for them. That is the important thing: if you know your wife or husband is having a difficult day, just send them home; do the natural thing, because you know that those people will repay you in spades. The Eden Project has less than 1 per cent, one day a year sickness rate compared to the Post Office which has, I think, something like 18 days per person.

It is also about giving permission to fail: I find that the times when you create an electric atmosphere is when you dare to talk about the things that MBA guys would never dream of talking about – stuff about your personal fears and questions, and the fact that you do occasionally have to lie to give yourself the courage actually to go and do something.

All of those things, which we all know are true, new people coming in don’t know. And they look at this group of, if you like, polished and burnished people called the bosses or chief executive, and imagine that they are flawless paragons of decision-making and kindness and all of those sorts of things, without realising that, inside every one of those suits, is a gibbering wreck a lot of the time.

I had a problem at the Eden Project very early on, which involved lengthy discourse about leadership with someone that joined us from outside the project. He couldn’t, because of insecurities, rid himself of the feeling that the way to guarantee leadership was to have people be in awe and fear of him.

While he was a good person, his insecurities meant that he would not ask for advice about things he didn’t know because he felt that it was a sign of weakness. Possessing the relaxed self-confidence to take the line that a great leader always appoints people better than them, takes a great deal of confidence.

We built Eden in an area with high unemployment and with very few people with managerial experience. Eighty per cent of our managers had never managed anything in their lives, so we had to undertake a huge training programme. One of the biggest things my team had to deal with was the role models of authority that people had. They were getting a lot of this from the movies and thought that being a boss was telling people what to do. This very quickly breeds a poisonous and excluding atmosphere.

I had to spend hours and hours telling stories to people about how great ‘bossmanship’ was to have a very high hand on the tiller and use the right language to inspire people to contribute.

One of the best leaders I’ve met is a very close friend. Whenever I see him in his work context, I’m completely gob-smacked by how close he is to the person I know around the kitchen table. He changes the people around the table to behave in a very uncompetitive way because his discourse is like a family around a table trying to sort out an issue and everybody has got something to contribute.

That is actually quite similar to how we work, but the trouble with strategy is you often throw out a lot of great ideas because you’ve got all this stuff that you must focus. One of my ‘bêtê-noires’ is the word ‘focus’ - I refuse to use it. I am absolutely scathing about people who say “the secret of success is focus”, because I always say that an eagle doesn’t spend all its time focusing; it glides over the moors and, out of its lateral vision, it occasionally picks up a movement, and the moment it sees something move, it focuses.

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Clever, smart people often don’t know how to be clever and smart without being arrogant and rude

Tim Smit
Chief Executive &
Co-Founder, The Eden Project

Tim, a former music industry composer/producer, moved to Cornwall in 1987 when he and John Nolson together ‘discovered’ and then restored the Lost Gardens of Heligan. Tim is now Chief Executive and Co-Founder of the Award winning Eden Project near St Austell in Cornwall. Eden has contributed over £900 million into the Cornish Economy.

In 2002 Tim was awarded an Honorary CBE in the New Years Honours List and he has also received Honorary Doctorates and Fellowships from a number of Universities. He was voted ‘Great Briton of 2001’ in the Environment category of the Morgan Stanley Great Britons Awards.

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