



To: The Subcommittee on West Kowloon Cultural District Development
From: *Planet Time*
Date: 9 September 2005
Re: **Report on Phase I Study**

Planet Time is pleased to have the opportunity to respond to the “Report on Phase I Study” (the Report) distributed by the **Subcommittee on West Kowloon Cultural District Development** of the Legislative Council (LegCo). The Report traces the history and circumstances of the proposed West Kowloon Cultural District (WKCD) and considers the many questions that have arisen in consideration of the current situation of having to choose between three screened-in proposals to the Government-issued Invitation for Proposals (“IFP”) for the development of the proposed WKCD.

A progression from an initial desire to develop, “a new, state-of-the-art performance venue” to a proposed arts and cultural hub on 40 hectares of reclaimed waterfront land with a single-package development approach that is effectively subsidised by the Government has occurred. LegCo’s conclusion, as is ours, is that the WKCD as currently proposed is not “financially free standing” and that a number of anomalies in the planning process have occurred. However, if the WKCD is to realize its potential as an arts and cultural hub that helps to define Hong Kong as “Asia’s world city” then this needs to be recognized as a unique development opportunity which may warrant thinking in new ways.

Background

LegCo should be commended on the depth and breadth of its examination of the basic assumptions and chain of events that have led to the current situation and to recommend expedient and acceptable ways of moving forward with the project generally. As LegCo notes in its report, the criticisms of the proposed WKCD are much less to do with its basic goals and objectives but rather the way in which the project should proceed.

Much of the debate and concern actually come from a common sentiment that the WKR can and should represent a chance to do something that will have a profound

impact on the long-term development of Hong Kong. The various concerns and visions for the site may be different but what all interested parties share is a passion for Hong Kong, both present and future.

As is, there is only a vision for the site based on the parameters of the IFP and a particular response to these parameters. We believe that there is too much at stake, too much potential and finally, too much risk, to accept one of the three screened-in responses to the IFP. While the three screened-in responses do an admirable job of responding to the IFP, they still fall short of some general perception of what the site could be. Private developers respond to the best of their ability within the given development parameters to both win the bid and to maximize their profit. The many findings of the report essentially validate this, as does the widespread debate and concern.

Goals of the WKCD

Many of the goals of the WKCD are indeed noble and forward-thinking and in the words of the current Secretary for Home Affairs the, “WKCD project provides us with a golden opportunity...This is an opportunity that we should seize and cherish...The WKCD project is an historic turning point for the development of our arts and culture. The WKCD is also an historic turning point for Hong Kong’s overall economy.”

It is *Planet Time’s* position that the WKCD should broadly, and as its ultimate goal be an essential part of, indeed a catalyst for, not just the development of the arts and culture in Hong Kong, but the establishment of Hong Kong as a capital for the creative industries in Asia. To this end, the long-term needs of the arts and cultural community in Hong Kong need to have input together with broader educational policies and the input of business leaders. An integrated approach that embraces both education and nourishment of the arts together with tie-ins to the business-end of creativity is what is needed to best serve Hong Kong’s long-term development.

Arts & Cultural Needs

The Planning Department Study of 1998 identified a number of areas with the potential as “cultural/entertainment” areas; the WKR was only one such site.

A significant amount of study/reporting has gone on in the case of the long-term development of the arts and culture in Hong Kong, although notably, much of it after

the decisions made by Government regarding the WKCD as laid out in the IFP. So, the nature of the specific cultural facilities/museums that Hong Kong may need still need to be evaluated within the context of a larger view of Hong Kong as a whole.

Regarding the specific provision of cultural facilities, it is our belief that there needs to be both more flexibility and more discernment about what, when, why and how the various components of the project are realized.

All of the gaps in Hong Kong's arts and cultural needs can not and should not be pinned on the proposed WKCD. If the current proposal for how to proceed is followed then the successful proponent will indeed be responsible for too much of the future development of arts and culture. The LegCo Report rightly points out that the responsibility of planning the cultural software should never be left to the private sector. However, we would like to note that we still believe that the private sector will have an important role to play in our vision of what the WKCD has the potential to mean to Hong Kong.

Public Private Partnership

In order to best ensure the long-term sustainability of the WKCD there must be creative and innovative thinking about how to structure the development approach, financing mechanisms, and management of the various components of the project and of the project as a whole.

LegCo proposes the creation of an Authority along the lines of that created for the Andoibarra project in Spain. This model is well worth considering and learning from but it should be remembered that while the projects are similar there are also potentially many differences and that these differences may lead to differences in how best to set up an Authority in this case. As many revenue sources as possible should be considered to ensure that the long-term goals of the project are sustainable. These revenue sources need not be derived solely from land. In both the US and the UK there are many examples of special authorities that use a range of funding and financing mechanisms and this range of examples should be studied. Various forms of "planning gain" should also be considered in order to maximize "value-for-money."

We believe that the potential value of the land could be much higher and that this should be explored further, together with the risks, such as the kind of declines in the

property market that have occurred in the recent past. While Government has, in a way, sought to mitigate these risks by adopting the single-developer approach, the risks are really just being passed on to the arts and cultural portions of the WKCD development. It is precisely these aspects of the proposed development that are most likely to suffer, while if the property development side of the project goes well, or better than expected, it seems unlikely that the benefits will be realized by the arts and cultural portion of the development.

The Single-Developer Approach and the Canopy

A question that looms large is whether the canopy approach is tied to the single-developer approach. It is LegCo's conclusion that there is not a necessary tie, although Government asserts otherwise. *Planet Time* still endorses the general idea of a canopy. However, we believe that there are many better solutions than the shown by the respondents. If not limited by the IFP then the goal of having a canopy (or similar) structure both as an architectural icon and as an effective shield from the elements can be achieved in more cost-effective and aesthetically interesting ways. For instance, we currently favour a series of interconnected geodesic structures that are evocative of a dragon's body and which utilize the latest and most innovative construction methods and materials.

We are trying to produce alternate visions while maintaining an overall approach that is organic. While we have shown a "built-out" version; it is not necessarily the end solution, we believe in an approach which will allow something along these lines to be built but the end result could be very different as different factors and ideas come in to play and are vetted by the public and the relevant authorities and stakeholders.

"Interim" Development on the Site

In all the debate about how to proceed with the long-term development of the WKCD, a significant issue has gone largely unaddressed. While outside of the scope of the LegCo, "Report on Phase I Study," we believe that it is very important that consideration is given to the current situation of the site being grossly underutilised and the potential for a short-term project on the site.

Inspired by the overall vision for the WKCD as a "cultural hub" that creates a catalyst for enhancing the long-term cultural vibrancy of Hong Kong, we are proposing an interim project on the site that is in the spirit of the long-term objectives for the

permanent development of the site. In this interim period, we perceive a tremendous opportunity to begin to utilize a portion of the site in a way that would positively impact the public's association of the site with its envisioned long-term uses.

Planet Time has prepared a preliminary proposal for a project of an "interim" nature on the site of the future, "West Kowloon Cultural District." Our proposal contemplates the creation of an integrated grouping of facilities and components that include three broad themes: arts, leisure/recreation, and education. We are referring to this clustering of distinct but related components under a single heading, the "West Kowloon Cultural Village."

The **key objectives** of the proposed "WKCV" are to:

- Establish a positive and lasting utilization and association of the WKCD site with the fostering of the arts and culture;
- Increase the public use and access of the site by complementing and adding to the other short-term projects for the;
- Offer a range of core activities and facilities that include the performing and creative arts, educational opportunities, and recreation/entertainment;
- Use revenue from commercial portions of the project together with other funding sources to support and sustain the arts and educational facilities;
- Maintain flexibility in the project so that particular components can be added or enhanced as needed and as new ideas emerge.

The **key components** of the proposed "WKCV" are:

- A collection of indoor and outdoor spaces for "hands-on" art workshops, art exhibitions, arts and cultural education;
- A stage for open-air concerts and events that would be available to both established and emerging performing artists with subsidized costs so that such events could remain free to the public;
- Space and support for the hosting of special events, performances, and marketplaces/fairs;
- Recreational and leisure facilities such as a walk-through "illuminarium" (a 1000m² installation), bungee-trampolines, gyroscopes, beach volleyball courts, food and beverage outlets, and possibly bring a "hands-on" centre for technology and design that offers interactive learning and provides an

educational angle that bridges the link between youth culture and the creative industries

We would like to see Hong Kong excited about what is to come by offering education, activities and public services themed on the goals of the West Kowloon Cultural District as an Arts and Culture hub. More generally, we believe that Hong Kong is at a critical juncture in its long-term development. The creative industries are widely seen to be an increasingly important part of Hong Kong's future and we want to immediately begin doing our part to promote the creative industries through the vehicle of the "West Kowloon Cultural Village" which will serve to nourish the latent creativity of the people of Hong Kong and provide an example of the link between the creative fields, business, and entertainment.

At this stage, we are still in discussion with various Arts and Culture groups and other possible content providers. We are also exploring development and sponsorship opportunities with various organizations. We have included a copy of our preliminary proposal for your consideration. We look forward to any feedback on this preliminary proposal. Further details may be found at: www.westkowloon.com.hk.