

October 3, 2006

Submission regarding West Kowloon Cultural District

Honorable Chair and Members of the Legislative Council

We urge to the Honorable members to separate the West Kowloon debate into three separate issues:

1. the territorial arts, culture, leisure and tourism development
  - a. visions
  - b. policies
2. the territorial requirements for arts, cultural, and entertainment venues
  - a. the venues we need
  - b. the venues we have
  - c. how we manage the venues
  - d. how we finance the construction of venues
3. land use planning
  - a. where to place venues; why/how to cluster venues
  - b. what to do with west kowloon

Regarding the first – the minutes of the advisory groups start to ‘emit’ various expressions on vision and policy for arts, culture, leisure and tourism. However, as these expressions were not within the mandate of the consultation – the question remains, when a more comprehensive expression of vision and policy for arts, culture, leisure and tourism development will be made, and when these will be debated. The overall vision and policy direction is yet unclear. Yet, the starting point should be recognition of the target audiences: The primary audience is the residents. Tourists follow residents. Next, our audience is business visitors. Do we entice business visitors to stay an extra day and bring their family the next time around? Finally, a key third audience is the residents from the PRD to spend a weekend?

Regarding the second issue – the territorial requirements for venues – although the process so far may have been somewhat unstructured and accidental – the entire debate from the mid 90’s to today has certainly done one thing – we now have reasonable certainty that the venues listed for ‘phase one’ are what Hong Kong truly needs. We are now moving forwards on the first step, the original starting point for the current debate.

However, the current debate has not resolved the abysmal state of some of the venues we do have, and how to improve their operation and function. As the financial advisory group has hired a consultant, it must be noted that we have yet to make an effort in privatizing existing venues. And therefore lack the experience, and lack a solid foundation to judge a consultant’s outcome, let alone have a Hong Kong base for solid research.

How we finance our new venues is yet to be determined. However, the mandate appears clear that a PPP is considered the right route. But why? We have a Capital Reserve Fund to fund public works – this can be used, the venues are cultural infrastructure after all. Is paying with property development rights the only way forward?

In considering the financing, should we not differentiate between the different type of venues? The black box theatres lack commercial viability and requires public or charity funding. The 15,000 seat facility however has clear commercial potential, and all that needs to be done is to make land available through appropriate zoning, and to allow the market to buy it at a fair value for this particular purpose.

Finally – urban planning issues. The concept for the agglomeration of venues is based on the PlanD study published in 1999: “Cultural Facilities: A study on their requirements and the formulation of new planning standards and guidelines”. The concept is based on studies of Manchester and Birmingham – and how to make these places attractive for people to stay over for a weekend by ensuring these cities have ample hotel, retail, and entertainment to cater for all needs, including their children.

HK has all these already. In close proximity and clustered around the Victoria Harbour.

The only HK specific issue in the study was the desire from people to be able to walk out and find a restaurant close by. The 1997 studies show a maximum of 5 minutes. Clearly, that calls for better planning of our urban environment – just not how to get from the Cultural Centre to the Peninsula; How to get from the APA to the Grand Hyatt. Not more than 5 minutes but entirely unreachable because of the lack of road crossings at grade, forcing people underground and over foot bridges.

Why cluster the facilities on a barren land? All we need to do is to address the urban and transport issues of our harbour-front and enhance the urban environment around the Victoria Harbour.

We are looking at HK the wrong way. The CBD does not stop and start in Rumsey street and Tamar. Our cultural district does not stop and start on West Kowloon. The land around Victoria Harbour is a cluster – it is THE central business and cultural district of the pearl river delta.

Some of the venues identified for phase one can be placed in the Central Police Station. Some may well fit in front of APA, making up the cultural corridor promoted by the Administration for the Central waterfront. The sports complex planned for Kai Tak already includes a small multifunctional stadium with the same brief as the 15,000 seat venue. The central and wanchai harbour-fronts are to include over 10 hectares of piazzas, musical fountains and 2 amphitheatres.

Finally, what else would suit West Kowloon? Is a cruise terminal better located in West Kowloon and TST, or in Kai Tak? What are the other territorial requirements which require harbour-front, and should be considered for West Kowloon?

Paul Zimmerman

Convenor, Designing Hong Kong Harbour District