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17 October, 2007

The Honourable Mr Alan Leong Kah-kit SC
Chairman
Subcommittee on West Kowloon
Cultural District Development
Legislative Council Building
Central, Hong Kong

Dear Mr Leong,

Re: West Kowloon Cultural District (WKCD)

The Hong Kong Arts Administrators Association's focus group on West Kowloon Cultural District has been monitoring and commenting from time to time on developments in the implementation of the project. We submitted position papers on WKCD to the HKSAR Government in March 2004, to Legco's Panel on Planning, Lands and Works in January 2005 and to the LegCo Subcommittee on West Kowloon in October 2005.

Please find attached a document that represents the Association's latest thinking on WKCD and on the Government Consultative Committee's recent recommendations.

Yours sincerely

Philip Soden
Convenor, Focus Group on WKCD

HONG KONG ARTS ADMINISTRATORS' ASSOCIATION
SUBMISSION TO LEGCO SUBCOMMITTEE ON WKCD
23 OCTOBER 2007

Executive summary

After extensive public consultation, there is now broad agreement about the range of cultural facilities that should be provided in WKCD, and the order in which they should be developed. It's time to re-focus the debate on art, which is after all WKCD's *raison d'être*.

The concept of creating synergy among and within art-forms is one of the greatest strengths of WKCD as proposed. The whole point of creating a cultural hub is to concentrate a critical mass of facilities in one place, a vibrant focal point where the interaction among the facilities and their users generates a whole that is greater than the sum of the parts.

Concentrating venues at WKCD does not preclude district based cultural hubs, and we welcome the Government's announcement to turn Central Police Station into a centre for arts and culture, as well as preserving heritage buildings in other districts to act as cultural focal points. These centres will provide an important audience development function and a training ground for arts managers in preparation for WKCD. However, the recommended facilities mix at WKCD should be seen as the minimum provision necessary for a successful arts hub.

So far, the vision of a vibrant, mutually supportive mix of business and culture in WKCD has not been fully articulated to the Hong Kong public. An *al fresco* pedestrianized district of theatres, both large and small, located alongside bars, restaurants, cafes, art shops, music stores, bookshops and so on, will provide a vibrant scene for locals and tourists alike. The Xiqu centre should be strategically located to anchor the entire development in Hong Kong's cultural identity.

As important as the bricks and mortar, will be the programming and management policies which will govern WKCD's operations and its role in Hong Kong. This needs to be defined early to take into account implications for aspects of venue planning as the project moves toward building design. Having said that, the arts community itself should be the active agent in formulating and evolving future developments. Government's role should be that of facilitator, especially in engaging other sectors and departments in the implementation of broad policy directions, for example in education, to increase arts content in the core primary and secondary school curricula, and in the establishment of a specialist arts secondary school which are commonplace elsewhere in the world.

Careful consideration should be given to the name of the new organization charged with development and management of WKCD. 'Authority' does not connote an organization entrusted with the creation, management, programming and future development of a significant part of the cultural sector. The idea of authoritarian control is anathema to creativity and the arts. WKCD 'Trust' is a more apposite title.

Thoughts should now turn to the composition of the WKCD Board of Trustees. At every stage of the project's life, WKCD should be guided by artistic expertise, in curation and in management, not excluding commercial theatre production and performing venue management. In the development phase, expertise in urban planning, architecture, legal and financial matters will also be required as well as marketing expertise. It would also be helpful for WKCD to establish its position in the international network of major performing arts venues as soon as possible.

The enabling legislation should establish clear delineation between the roles of Governance in the hands of the Board of Trustees, and that of Management, in the hands of the Directors of the cultural facilities. The Trust should be empowered with a broad scope of responsibilities so as not to hamper its independence. The WKCD Trust should explore a variety of operating modes to suit the particular nature of each arts facility. Opportunities for outsourcing and public-private partnership should be encouraged to enhance community involvement.

Once operational, WKCD will not exist in a vacuum. In the meantime, there is still a lot of work to do in improving existing LCSD performing venues and museums, in human resource development, in nurturing of local talent and in audience education.

Due to historical circumstances, there is only a handful of experienced venue managers outside of the civil service. We therefore strongly recommend that human resource planning be an integral part of the planning and preparation work for WKCD. Macau is already draining expertise from the Hong Kong market to operate the performance and exhibition venues along the Cotai Strip, and Hong Kong needs to step up training of arts and event managers, as well as backstage technical staff to replace the brain drain.

In the intervening years between now and WKCD's opening, additional resources need to be set aside either by Government or by the WKCD Trust for development of arts management talent, using as training grounds the existing flagship performing companies, the LCSD venue partnership scheme and the proposed district-based heritage building cultural hubs.

Hong Kong is being left behind by other Asian centres in terms of cultural infrastructure development. When the remaining hotels along Macau's CoTai strip are completed, their combined theatre seating capacity will exceed that of the entire WKCD development. It's time to stop talking about the WKCD project, and start doing it.

Hardware

After extensive public consultation, there is now broad agreement about the range of cultural facilities that should be provided in WKCD, and the order in which they should be developed. There is ample open space set aside for public enjoyment, and to provide for future organic growth of cultural facilities within the district. It is now time to refocus the debate on the art which WKCD is intended to support.

The concept of creating synergy among and within art-forms is at risk from well-intentioned, but ill-advised proposals to distribute the proposed WKCD facilities over a wider area. The whole point of creating a cultural hub is to locate a critical mass of facilities in one place, a vibrant focal point where the interaction among the facilities and their users generates a whole that is greater than the sum of the parts. This clustering effect is an essential feature of the WKCD proposal and 15 performing venues should be seen as the minimum provision. Concentrating a critical mass of facilities at WKCD does not preclude district based cultural hubs, and we welcome the Government's announcement to turn Central Police Station into a centre for arts and culture, as well as preserving heritage buildings in other districts to act as cultural focal points. These centres will provide an important audience development function and a training ground for artistic talent and arts managers in preparation for WKCD.

Mixing arts disciplines in one area also allows for complementary programming across different art forms, and opportunities for cross-disciplinary inspiration and collaboration, but this will only be effective if the district also houses resident companies' production and rehearsal facilities. At present, the Government's proposal only provides that "space should be set aside for" such facilities and it will be left to the WKCD Trust to create them. An alternative is to cluster production facilities together outside of the district – for example, the old Wanchai Police Station could be converted into a home for several performing companies and visual arts groups.

So far, the vision of a vibrant, mutually supportive mix of business and culture in WKCD has not been fully articulated to the Hong Kong public. An al fresco pedestrianized district of theatres, both large and small, located alongside bars, restaurants, cafes, art shops, music stores, bookshops and so on, will provide a vibrant scene for locals and tourists alike. The Xiqu centre should be strategically located to anchor the entire development in indigenous culture and establish its identity as part of the Hong Kong brand. It offers an opportunity to develop and update iconic Chinese architecture and present an accessible tourist attraction in addition to its role of presenting and promoting Cantonese Opera.

But the devil is in the detail - as one participant at a WKCD consultative forum remarked – "the district has to be artistic from start to finish. Even the lampposts and rubbish bins should be artistic."

More important than any architectural detail is a coherent vision for the WKCD beyond bricks and mortar and seating capacity. Arts facilities, more so than any other buildings, live or die by what happens inside. It is people, programming and artistic activity that will determine its success and its identity. The world's greatest concert hall, if filled with school concerts, will remain a spectacular school hall, and little else. In addition, the ways in which the venues are to be used, the frequency of use and identities of the users will impact on facility planning. Stakeholders and clientele include artists, promoters, presenters, audiences and ambient public. It is only with a clear vision of their roles, responsibilities and behaviours, that the most suitable physical provisions can be planned. The arts community should be actively engaged in articulating and describing this vision.

As a facilitator, Government should keep its support for the arts in step with the arts community's aspirations through consultative mechanisms.

Preparation for WKCD must include a revision of education, particularly in the inclusion of arts content in the core primary and secondary school curricula. Exposing children to the arts throughout their school years inspires creativity and the capacity for original thought in all students, whatever their chosen future profession. It inspires career choices among the next generation of arts and creative industries practitioners. Gaining an appreciation for the arts at school also serves an important audience development function. Unfortunately Hong Kong lags decades behind developed countries in this respect.

At present, secondary students who wish to pursue a career in the arts in Hong Kong need to undertake extra-curricular training because there are no preparatory courses available within the school system. Preparation for tertiary education in non-arts professions is routinely accepted as a central role of secondary education, but the arts and creative industries are lumped together under the umbrella of "career oriented curricula" alongside hairdressing and cookery classes. The low priority given to arts subjects extends to their assessment methodology and marking systems which lack the academic rigour of 'mainstream' subjects.

The Education Department has yet to establish a specialist arts secondary school which are commonplace elsewhere in the world, not only in developed countries but also in mainland China, the former Soviet-bloc countries in eastern Europe, and even in Vietnam. While international schools in Hong Kong generally have greater arts provision than those operated by the Government, the fees are beyond the reach of most ordinary families, and history has shown that the rich do not have a monopoly on creativity or artistic ability.

WKCD authority

WKCD 'Authority' is not an appropriate title for an organization entrusted with the creation, management, programming and future development of a significant part of the cultural sector. The idea of authoritarian control is anathema to creativity and the arts. WKCD 'Trust' is a more apposite title, and there are many examples in other countries where the governing bodies of major cultural facilities are called trusts. Implicit in the role of a Trustee is a responsibility to serve the interests of the community at large on behalf of whom the cultural assets are being managed.

Enabling Legislation

One of the main challenges ahead will be deciding how to enshrine the arts community's collective vision for West Kowloon in the enabling legislation. How can we ensure that the right people are appointed as Trustees, and are given sufficient autonomy to carry through the master plan without undue interference from external forces? Unfortunately one can't legislate for creativity or vision. The closest one can get is to define the types of people that should be appointed or elected to the

WKCD Trust, to set up particular categories of representation, and ensure that the Trust's mission and objectives are very clearly set out.

Representation on the Board of Trustees

The following suggestions are put forward as a starting point for further discussion:

Chairman

The Chairman should have experience in large-scale project management in Government or the private sector, and should have credibility with the arts community.

Arts Expertise

At every stage of the project's life, WKCD should be guided by artistic expertise in visual and performing arts (e.g. experienced practicing artists), museum curation / management, commercial theatre production and venue management.

Other Expertise

In its initial stages, much of the WKCD Trust's focus will be on setting out the district master plan and overall business plan. Expertise in urban planning, architecture, legal and financial matters will also be required as well as input from the tourism sector and marketing expertise. As we are aiming for world-class facilities, the trustees should have an international perspective. Even these non-arts areas would ideally be represented by arts-lovers within their respective professions.

Public Representation

There should be two 'lay' representatives of the general public who will be using the public open spaces at WKCD.

Definition of responsibilities

The Trust should be empowered with a broad scope of responsibilities so as not to hamper its independence. Its mission should include facility creation, management, programming, operation, maintenance and ultimately replacement; cultural development; audience development; arts education including but not limited to schools' outreach and in-reach programmes; local and international programming including the commissioning of new works; property management (re renting office space to cultural organizations that base themselves at WKCD and retail space to bars, restaurants and arts-related retail outlets within WKCD) and any activity incidental to these objects.

Modes of Governance

The enabling legislation should establish clear delineation between the roles of Governance in the hands of the Board of Trustees, and that of Management, in the hands of the Artistic Directors of the cultural facilities. Governance should address policy, long-term planning and compliance with statutory obligations. Management should address artistic programming and day to day operation of the cultural facilities and public open spaces. There should be a variety of modes of operation to suit the

particular nature of each facility or group of facilities. Opportunities for outsourcing and public-private partnership should be encouraged to enhance ‘community involvement’.

Cultural software development

There is already a pressing shortage of venues – some 45% of applications for performance venue bookings last year were unsuccessful. In the time taken to construct WKCD this problem is likely to increase. Accordingly, the provision of centrally located venues is lagging behind demand, and development of sufficient performing content to fill the venues, considering the existing unsatisfied demand for spaces from both local and international producers, will not be an issue.

Audience Development

Setting aside for a moment the Mega performing venue, which really ought to be seen as re-provisioning the acoustically and aesthetically unsuitable Coliseum, the other performing venues proposed for Phase 1 of WKCD represent less than 10% of the existing seating capacity across Hong Kong. As there has not been any major addition to theatre facilities in recent years, a 10% growth in audience numbers over a 15 year period is both realistic and achievable.

Human Resources Development

This is a more pressing problem – due to the long-standing virtual Government monopoly in provision of performance venues, there is only a handful of experienced venue managers outside of the civil service. We therefore strongly recommend that human resource planning be an integral part of the planning and preparation work for WKCD.

Macau is already draining expertise from the Hong Kong market to operate the performance and exhibition venues along the Cotai Strip, and Hong Kong needs to step up training of arts and event managers, as well as backstage technical staff to replace the brain-drain. The proposal to create black box venues and exhibition spaces in the Central Police Station can be realised a lot sooner than WKCD, and will provide a training ground for additional management and technical staff in anticipation of WKCD’s opening.

Preparatory steps should include development of management talent within the existing arts sector. Flagship companies should draw up succession plans, training senior management and capable middle managers (from both public and private sectors) through study tours, attending short courses overseas, short overseas attachments and so on. Schemes should be set up to enable such managers to learn about arts administration in Mainland China through short attachments and/or exchange schemes. Training programmes should be established to attract experienced managers from other professions who are passionate about the arts to become arts managers, and to attract distinguished arts managers from China and other countries to work in Hong Kong.

There needs to be a well-designed package of Human Resources Development

measures phased over the intervening years between now and WKCD's opening. Additional resources will need to be set aside for such measures either by Government or the WKCD Trust, rather than expecting flagship companies to fund such training from their existing resources.

The Bigger Picture

Once operational, WKCD will not exist in a vacuum. In the meantime, there is still a lot of work to do in improving existing performing venues and museums. The proposed LCSD venue partnership scheme falls a long way short of solving the problems these venues currently face and is at best a stop-gap measure. In the fullness of time and with WKCD venues acting as a major hub, it is possible to envisage a revision of the role of the present LCSD venues, including the transfer of management of the existing 400 seat LCSD civic centres into the hands of resident performing companies who would subsidize their operating costs from theatre rental income. This dual funding mechanism could provide checks and balances against the resident company monopolizing the venue for their own use.

In the meantime, a comprehensive inventory of existing infrastructure and its management must accompany the development of the WKCD. The important lesson to learn from existing LCSD venues is that once a facility is completed and in use, it is very difficult to change its image and identity. Therefore it is imperative that the WKCD development is informed by a very clear vision as to its nature, purpose, character and mission,

Time for Action

Hong Kong is being left behind by other Asian centres in terms of cultural infrastructure development. When the remaining hotels along Macau's CoTai strip are completed, their combined theatre seating capacity will exceed that of the entire WKCD development. It's time to stop talking about the WKCD project, and start doing it.