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WKCD-437

Clerk to Subcommittee on
West Kowloon Cultural District
Legislative Council Secretariat
3/F Citibank Tower
Garden Road
Central
Hong Kong

[20th October, 2007]

Dear Sir,

Re: Submission on the West Kowloon Cultural District

Following widely-held public consultations, the debate about the future development of arts and culture in Hong Kong has generated great public interest. The current proposal on the WKCD is for a multi-function performance venue and exhibition space for contemporary art (M+), overseen by an independent statutory body and financed by the sale of surrounding land for development.

In the past, local indigenous culture was expressed primarily through the traditions of great cuisine in restaurants and neighbourhood attractions such as wet-markets, the jade and bird markets, wedding-card street; traditional festivals such as the Dragon Boat Festival, Mid-autumn festival, Cheung Chau bun festival, Cantonese opera, and others. With the evolution of modern life-styles, these traditional forms of culture are gradually in decline. We are of the view that a heritage conservation policy to preserve these would be highly desirable.

At the same time, Hong Kong has witnessed an emergence of artists' and theatre groups, such as the Cattle Depot and Fo Tan, the Chung Ying Theatre group and others which represent genuine, grass-root level developments in local arts and culture. These groups have close ties with local communities and will continue to evolve naturally, but are often hampered by high property prices, the lack of facilities for studio and rehearsal space, few resources and poor public recognition. In communities, arts & theatre could prove to be a very valuable resource for local youths with few other positive, creative outlets. The government could thus encourage the growth of artistic endeavour through considered subsidies and by granting free space.

Ultimately, with government initiative, Hong Kong can gradually change from being a trading and financially-based community, to a more multi-faceted, creative and knowledge-based society through stronger culture, arts and theatre curriculums in schools.



WKCD represents the other end of the spectrum and the desire to build iconic structures to display highly evolved forms of art. While West Kowloon is a very good location for performance and rehearsal venues, it is somewhat awkward for an art museum as it does not have natural traffic, and when there are no exhibitions on show, would suffer from low attendance and the costs of maintenance of the museum would have to be taken into account. Furthermore, great museums require great collections, and in the absence of that, M+ could become an exhibition space not unlike that of the HK Arts Centre or the HK

Visual Arts Centre. One way to get around this problem is to make it a franchise of a foreign museum like the Guggenheim Museum or Pompidou Centre, if only to benefit the local population by bringing more contemporary art from abroad, however, this will not distinguish it from other similarly franchised museums around the world. Will the government be willing to shoulder more costs for its exhibitions?

If the final decision is made to build M+ it should strive to be a magnificently original structure by engaging a visionary architect.

Finally, it is obvious to many that there is a dearth of green space for people to go and relax and admire the natural beauty of the harbour. Sadly, the harbour is already overbuilt and marred by pollution. While it would be tempting to build more housing, restaurants and shopping in West Kowloon, we may be doing our future generations the greatest good by incorporating as much parkland as we could into West Kowloon.

As to the independent statutory board to oversee the WKCD, this body needs sufficient autonomy to employ/hire its staff outside of the civil service and make decision about its finances, but some degree of governmental participation may be preferable to none. A mechanism of checks and balances might be desirable.

With regard to the operational aspects of the WKCD project, some observations are set out in the attached Annexure.

We hope that our observations are of assistance to you in your deliberation on the project and we wish you every success in achieving the WKCD vision.

Yours sincerely,

Pansy LEUNG
President, 2006-08

Enc.



Annexure:

Operational Issues

An important criterion for sustainable development of the WKCD vision is the availability of sufficient financial resources, not just for the construction of the hardware nor the development of the software, but the continued maintenance and operation once the hardware is completed and the software gradually matures. This issue is an important one which should be closely studied and publicly discussed in the same manner as the proposed cultural vision of the WKCD development itself. It appears that the main projected income source when the WKCD facilities are eventually in operation would be from the hiring and utilization of the facilities by the public. It is noted that in the Final Report of the Financial Advisor for the Development of the WKCD and Related Matters (April 2007) that the “key risk in operating a facility is demand risk” (Para.9.1 of Annex J). It is further noted that in the Executive Summary of the Economic impact of developing the West Kowloon Cultural District (May 2007) the number of projected local residents attending exhibitions and arts performances in WKCD in Year 2015 is 4,618,000. On the basis that the current local population is 7,000,000, this projected figure would envisage half of the current population using the paying facilities of the WKCD at least once a year. Whilst this projection may be justified, nevertheless, it is submitted that sufficient caution should be taken in post-completion financial projection to ensure that financial feasibility and stability continues, especially in the infancy period of the WKCD.

If WKCD were to be a success in attracting substantial number of visitors, this would result in substantial increase of road traffic leading to WKCD, especially, when there is any exhibition or performance which attracts a significant audience size. The thoroughfares leading to the WKCD vicinities would need to be reviewed, both for the sake of the current local residents but as well as for the future visitors of the WKCD.

The proactive identification of local artistic talents as well as local arts groups or organizations would assist in building the software development as mentioned in the Recommendation report of the Consultative committee on the Core Arts and Cultural Facilities of the WKCD which is necessary to support and justify the hardware of WKCD.