

Response to the Subcommittee on West Kowloon Cultural District Development's
"Invitation of views on the way forward for the WKCD project"

By the Zonta Club of Hong Kong

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A great deal has been expressed about what the present Administration should or should not do regarding the development of WKCD. The discussions have focused primarily on the infrastructure of the project. What seems necessary, even at this juncture when many decisions seem to have been made, is to take a step back and look at arts and culture in a broader perspective beyond WKCD. Only in this manner are we more likely to arrive at the solutions to the questions set out by the Subcommittee and the Government's public consultations.

The issues facing this Administration regarding WKCD are not only about which developer should be awarded the contract, what percentage of land, plot ratio, administrative authority, financing etc., but what kind of a society do we envision for the future. Of what significance is culture and arts to Hong Kong? How can we build and sustain culture? How do we transform a society which has been traditionally financial-based into a multi-faceted society? What changes in our consciousness and value system does that require? Do we need to change the way we teach creativity, artistic expression and artistic endeavour to our young? Do we need to strengthen our commitment to arts education in schools so as to build up wider participation and nurture artistic talent for the future (bottom-up), or do we construct great facilities in hopes of encouraging the arts through them (top-down)? Are we prepared to dig into the public purse to finance the arts or are we trying to forge a partnership between the private sector and the arts? How do we encourage more public support and participation from the private sector?

If the Government is able to provide a framework and vision for the future development of arts and culture, the details of the WKCD could be delegated to an advisory/statutory body to work out within that framework. This statutory body would consist of experts in arts development and administration, artists, financial advisors, architectural planners, and able civic leaders. Once such an authority is established, and its goals determined in consultation with the Government, it would have the power to oversee and implement the project.

The Government appears to have locked itself into a rigid formula of "canopy +4 museums +1 performance venue" quite early on. During the public consultation process the public was asked to select among three proposals that conformed to the above specifications, but was not asked whether they supported the formula itself or whether they might prefer another alternative. A fourth, unofficial submission which sought to address the larger issues in the context of a holistic development plan for the harbour, provided both a viable and desirable alternative, but because of its omission of the canopy, this proposal has been completely excluded from further consideration. We strongly urge the Government to re-examine this proposal and the far-reaching implications contained in it.

Concerns in the Phase I report:

1a) Having clear overall objectives would definitely benefit the planning of the contents of the West Kowloon Cultural District in relation to the needs of the community;

b) It would also help to understand that arts and culture exist in close relation to the community, and that building arts facilities in less accessible areas could result in isolation and lower attendance rates;

c) The single-package development approach has its advantages and disadvantages. The advantage being that the site would be developed in a concerted way, with responsibility resting very squarely on one party, and the disadvantage is the same: by putting all the eggs in one basket, the process will strongly favour one developer;

d) The more informed the Government is, the stronger its position with which to negotiate and supervise;

e) The most controversial feature in the project so far is the canopy. If building the canopy does not add true value to the development, but may result in future maintenance problems and financial burden, it would be wise to reconsider its construction. Certainly the success of WKCD does not depend upon the canopy;

f) There is great need for the arts community's and experts' views on this matter;

g) There should definitely be an overseeing body for the planning and implementation of the project, some of which members could carry on to form part of the statutory administration, but all selected with due process and consideration.

Development Mode

2. Supposing that we are able to plan and envision the development of WKCD as part of a whole. Supposing that land on WKCD could be parceled more evenly among several developers for primarily commercial and residential development (while providing sufficient space for open parkland along the waterfront). Then the income generated from land sales could be earmarked for a more comprehensive upgrading of arts facilities, including the renovation of the Tsim Sha Tsui Cultural Centre, the building a new Modern Art Museum on the Tamar site, and the building of performance and rehearsal facilities on West Kowloon.

Statutory Body

3. The composition of the statutory body is of paramount importance. It would include expert advisors in a number of relevant fields as described earlier. This statutory body would be involved from the very beginning. It will have responsibility to oversee the

planning, design, and development of WKCD, and work to achieve the goals set out. Once the project is finished, some of its members will carry on to the next stage to form a statutory/administrative body which will oversee the administration and operation of the WKCD.

4. The Government would do well to seek expert advice about what types of cultural venues (and how many) would be suitable and needed to build on WKCD, considering its location. Taking the time to research the issues now will be immensely beneficial and will prevent costly mistakes.

5. The statutory body can make the necessary recommendations to the Government, while the latter has the power approval/veto. The Government can have an overseeing role over both the statutory body and the developer(s). The statutory body is accountable to the Government, while the developer works directly with the statutory body. The Government will mediate between the statutory body and the developer should any conflict arise.

6. The statutory body would ideally contain sufficient expertise in the areas of arts development, arts administration, finance, architecture, planning, in addition to civic leadership which is free of special interest. The statutory body would have the power to give directives to and monitor the developer, as well as make modifications where necessary. The consultative process with the Government can be in the form of regular meetings, with an approval/vetoing power by the latter. Following consultation with the Government, the statutory body would have discretion over the implementation of these decisions.

7. It needs to be decided whether the statutory body's responsibilities will include the entire development of West Kowloon or only the cultural facilities. Ideally the Government would have a blueprint of the overall development, while the statutory body would determine the cultural contents. However, initially, it may be necessary for an independent advisory body to make recommendations to the Government regarding the overall blueprint.

8. This question bears further consideration. If the developer is to have a future role in the management of the cultural facilities, then it should definitely be a part of the statutory body, otherwise not.

Trust Fund

9. This depends on how the figure \$30 billion was arrived at and what assumptions were made in determining it. This figure needs further analysis.

10. If the fund is earmarked solely for the maintenance of facilities on WKCD, then by the statutory body with the consent of the Government, but if the funds are also used to support other arts facilities, then the Government should have a greater overseeing role.

11. The trust fund could certainly be used to support the development of arts groups and other 'cultural software', while income from commercial activities could also be ploughed back into the trust fund, however, the implications of the latter need to be considered.

12. The trust fund should be regularly audited. The statutory body must include and avail itself of sound financial advice.

Planning and Implementation

13. Not all the specifics of the residential and commercial land development need to be known at the unveiling of the Master Layout plan for the WKCD, but there should be a clear idea as to what percentage of the land these will occupy and where.

14. An overall plan would certainly be useful.

15. Probably yes, but only with the approval of the statutory body.

16. A sufficient role to facilitate the process, not to obstruct it.

Canopy

17. The canopy was the result of an earlier initiative before concrete plans for the WKCD were determined. The challenges it poses in terms of cost of construction and maintenance are sufficient to warrant re-consideration. The Government would be wise not to give in to special interest groups, but to evaluate the canopy's long-term viability and the real value it adds to the WKCD. If the findings indicate that the canopy could present a long-term public burden and does not add sufficient value to the development of the area, the government should take the decision to scrap it.

Public Consultation

An overall arts policy for the future development of arts would include arts education, support for existing arts groups, construction of new facilities that will have a genuine, long-term impact, and renovation of existing facilities. This can be accomplished in consultation with educators, the arts community, and informed experts in the field. Timely public consultations can help the Government gauge public support for the project, but need not involve technical specifications.

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