

The Hong Kong Academy for Performing Arts

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The Honourable Mr Lau Wong-fat
Chairman
LegCo Panel on Planning, Lands and Works
Legislative Council Building
Central, Hong Kong

Dear Mr Lau,

Re: West Kowloon Cultural District (WKCD)

At its meeting on 1 December, the Academy Council endorsed the concept of the West Kowloon Cultural District (WKCD) and authorised the Academy to articulate its support. One aspect of the WKCD development to receive specific praise from the Academy Council is the integrated town planning approach, which is rarely seen in Hong Kong. However, that systemic approach now appears to be in doubt as ongoing contentious debate has engendered a diversity of news on issues around single and multiple developers.

This question has diverted attention from the positive elements of a cultural hub and substantive issues of concern to the arts community and society at large. There is a necessary social agenda to West Kowloon, one that integrates arts and culture, education, ecology, architecture and landscape. The Academy is particularly interested in the educational and arts development aspects of the project. Whether or not one accepts that arts education can benefit society as a whole, or that it is a pre-requisite for the growth of creative industries, the importance of arts education to the future success of the West Kowloon Cultural District is self-evident. The first priority of WKCD should be to develop further arts and cultural engagement among Hong Kong residents. Without it the district will lack social relevance, audience numbers and economic viability. Cultural tourism alone cannot sustain it in the longer term. Enhancing appreciation of culture in Hong Kong is a pre-condition of a civil society. It is also key to development of our creative industries.

At recent consultative forums about WKCD, attention has been drawn to the apparent inconsistency between the Government's hardware-first, all-at-once approach, and community-led organic cultural growth over time. However, as far as the performing arts are concerned, the need for the mandatory WKCD performing venues has already been clearly established by consultancies into the utilization of existing venues, which were overflowing prior to the Asian economic downturn, and will be again as soon as the economy recovers. Other facilities included in the short-listed WKCD proposals, such as arts educational facilities, permanent homes for the professional performing companies and affordable studio space for artists, can also be easily justified on the basis of present needs. The only area in which WKCD seems to be ahead of its time is in the provision of museums, but there is a ten year lead-time before such facilities will be opened, during which collections can be built, visual arts education stepped up and a case developed further for an arts rich society and a common-wealth.

If, as some have suggested, the cultural facilities at WKCD are constructed in several phases, the already completed facilities in the district might be surrounded by a succession of noisy, visually intrusive building sites some years after initial opening. Public amenity and enjoyment of the cultural facilities, piazzas, open-air exhibition spaces and gardens, may be seriously compromised for as long as it took to complete the various phases.

If West Kowloon is to contribute to Hong Kong's claim to be Asia's world city, then its cultural facilities need to be nothing less than world class in terms of design, performance outputs and modes of governance. In this connection, the recent calls for the involvement of multiple developers, while well-intentioned, might lead to reduction of architectural values and overall quality of facilities. Smaller developers simply cannot afford architects of the distinction of Norman Foster, Richard Rogers or Cesar Pelli. It is also likely that there would be consequent downscaling in the quality of consultants engaged on the project - museum designers, town planners, acousticians, and so on.

If Government had to pick up responsibility for the common areas between buildings, the area might, while fulfilling basic requirements, lack the systemic vision conveyed in the short-listed proposals. Modes of governance proposed by WKCD proponents appear to follow good governance practice in that they include independent, autonomous board structures comprising arts professionals to oversee management of facilities.

On the other hand, if each cultural museum and theatre were built and operated by a separate developer, the governance of the site could become complicated and dissipate valuable energy and resources away from artistic and educational content. Duplication of management structures and loss of economies of scale might mean less money for arts and education due to higher administrative overheads. It might also be difficult to arrange synergetic programming and to coordinate and integrate operations amongst facilities.

In the Academy's view, West Kowloon has the potential to exert far-reaching positive influences on the quality of life in our society while helping to promote Hong Kong's cultural diversity. The community's confidence, creativity, civic pride and visitors' perceptions of Hong Kong, all stand to gain.

Yours sincerely

Professor Kevin Thompson
Director

cc Chief Secretary for Administration, the Hon. Mr Donald Tsang Yam-kuen JP
Secretary for Home Affairs, the Hon. Dr Patrick Ho Chi-ping
Legislative Council Representative for the Functional Constituency of Sports,
Performing Arts, Culture and Publications, the Hon. Mr Timothy Fok GBS JP