

For information on
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Legislative Council
Panel on Home Affairs and Panel on Development
Joint Subcommittee to Monitor the Implementation of the
West Kowloon Cultural District Project

Planning and Development of M+

PURPOSE

This paper serves to update Members on the progress of the planning and development of M+.

THE M+ VISION

2. As the Museum Advisory Group expressed in its report of 23 November 2006 to the Consultative Committee on the Core Arts and Cultural Facilities of the West Kowloon Cultural District (WKCD), M+ would be a single cultural institution with its mission to focus on the 20th and 21st century visual culture, broadly defined, from a Hong Kong perspective, the perspective of now, and with a global vision. M+ - the new museum for visual culture in the WKCD - will be built from inside out, meaning that its physical design will be shaped around the visions, the ideas and eventually the contents that are being formulated now and over the coming years.

3. The M+ project rests on four cornerstones -

- (a) This is an ambitious project not only in the physical sense but also in the museological aspirations. The true ambition lays in the nature of the institution that M+ is intended to be, that is, a museum for contemporary art and visual culture, which would eventually attain an international status comparable to the Museum of Modern Art in New

York, Centre Pompidou's Musée National d'Art Moderne, or Tate Modern.

- (b) This is a project with a strong public service ethos. The fundamental idea is that it should be a museum for the more than seven million people living and working in Hong Kong. It would be firmly rooted in the location and its unique culture by providing a "Hong Kong perspective". This idea is by no means unique; historically, all the museums mentioned above are deeply rooted in, and shaped by, the places where they were engendered. Today, however, it is not uncommon that new mega-museums are created mainly with a view to attracting tourists to places with a limited local public. A public service ethos and a strong local or regional focus do not necessarily undermine the capacity to attract visitors from afar. On the contrary, an essential part of travelling consists of immersing oneself in the local culture, and of experiencing something unique.

- (c) This is a project that aims to regenerate the institution we call a Museum. As described by the Museum Advisory Group, "it requires commitment, excellence and innovation at every stage." M+ will set for itself the highest international standards comparable with those of the world-leading facilities. These include codes of ethics, research, curatorship, conservation, interpretation and education, display, management and operation. While M+ should adopt the best practices in every field, it should – and this is vital - also challenge the models that currently dominate the museum sector. M+ will be a museum of its time and of its place. The cultural ecology which M+ will be a part of has different traditions, histories and experiences than those which engendered today's leading museums. The public experiences and expectations, the approach to artistic production and the relationship between the various strands in what we could broadly define as visual culture – design, architecture, visual art, moving images and so on – also differ in some respects from those of the West.

(d) As mentioned in paragraph 2 above, this is a project that will be created “from inside out”.

4. M+ will not be an isolated cultural island in the urban landscape, but a hub for visual culture in the ambitious WKCD. There will be exceptional opportunities for exchanges, not only within different fields of visual culture but also between performing arts and visual arts. In fact, this is entirely in line with the cultural production today, where interdisciplinary artistic practices would appear to be of the greatest interest. In WKCD, and especially within M+, the focus is almost exclusively on this interdisciplinary exchange.

5. M+ will reflect this interdisciplinary exchange by exploring the interface between visual art, design, architecture, film and various aspects of popular culture. Integration and cross-fertilisation will be M+'s main theme, but it is nevertheless vital that the specificities of particular art disciplines can also be presented. There is a history to be told about Hong Kong cinema and the development of Asian design, not to mention the history of ink art, which is part of both a separate thousand-year-old Chinese tradition and an integral genre in contemporary art.

6. Just as the collection and exhibitions should reflect both their time and place, so should the presentation mode. Undoubtedly, the museum's future exhibition spaces will predominantly be white cubes and black boxes, as in any other museum; however, there is also an ambition to find presentation formats that complement the material, the encounters and the traditions that the new museum seeks to communicate.

7. One of the goals is to create several “third spaces” for the works in the collection – interactive places that are neither exhibition spaces nor sequestered storage facilities. Zones that are in between “back-of-house” and “front-of-house” could be the key to realising the vision of a museum as a fundamentally educational facility, a place where learning is not merely an add-on but the core. Library and research facilities can be opened to the public, where the fascinating processes of the conservation department can be more public and less enigmatic. M+ is a project that strives to regenerate the institution

known as a museum – a place where the museum visitors become active, learning participants: users of their “museum plus”.

8. The M+ collection looks at the world from a Hong Kong perspective. The collection could be envisioned as a set of concentric circles, with Hong Kong in the middle, followed by China, Asia and, lastly, the rest of the world. In essence, the strategy for the collection is not that different from any other leading museum in the West, though the vantage-point is different.

9. All these are formulated even before the architectural design competition for M+ is announced. What kind of building should house the evolving M+ vision? A building that acknowledges the unique location of M+ on a peninsula in Victoria Harbour, opposite the spectacular forest of skyscrapers on Hong Kong Island. A building with institutional dignity, serving as a symbol for the museum as a guarantor of quality and integrity while being transparent and accessible, with a design that clearly states even from the outside that “you are welcome in, this is yours”. An architecture that provides spaces that are friendly to both art and visitors. A building for excellence and access.

10. M+ is a museum that will have a strong digital presence, and public art projects that can be viewed throughout the 40 hectares of the West Kowloon Cultural District. This is a museum that will pursue a nomadic existence and collaborate with artists in projects on sites of their choosing right up to the completion of the building at the end of 2017, and will continue to reach out to the public in their own neighbourhoods, in schools and in community centres. Yet, the building itself is vital. Now, and for the foreseeable future, the building is the museum’s main tool, and its symbolic significance is greater than ever, as the cultural genres grow ever more fluid and mutant. A museum for its time and place also requires a building for its time and place.

LATEST DEVELOPMENT

11. To realize the M+ vision, thorough planning on different aspects of the project, including staffing, capacity building, collection

and acquisition policy, acquisition committee, the museum building itself, stakeholder engagement, audience building as well as publicity, is of crucial importance. Last year, there were concrete developments in all these areas.

Staffing

12. The M+ team has grown from a headcount of three a year ago to 10 full-time staff plus three short-term contract staff, with seven more full-time posts being advertised. With the clearer understanding of the mission and vision of M+, our new recruitment announcements have garnered extraordinary interest on all fronts. Many of the more recent recruits are world-class curators. The majority of the team have a Hong Kong background, but there are also members from other parts of Asia, such as Singapore and Mainland China, as well as from Germany and the USA.

Capacity Building

13. M+ has three main routes in capacity building:

- (a) Nurturing young talents through internship programmes. The first of these, called the “Ten Week Learning Programme”, involving three aspiring curators from Hong Kong, was successfully concluded in March 2012. A new, similar programme is planned for the autumn of 2012, while for the spring of 2013 another even more ambitious internship programme is planned in connection with M+ organizing the Hong Kong participation in the Venice Biennale.
- (b) Recruiting junior staff with the right skill sets for specialized posts and sending them overseas for in-house training in collaboration with major museums, thereby bringing the knowledge to Hong Kong.
- (c) Strategic hiring of overseas experts who will come and work in M+, building up their teams and, over time, transferring their expertise.

14. The main challenge in capacity building in the museum field is not of art administration or curatorial type, but is related to specialized roles for which there is no formal training or formal training is not sufficient, such as exhibition-, loan in- and loan out-registrars, master packers, art handlers, as well as conservators.

Collection and Acquisition

15. Since the autumn of 2010, the basic acquisition strategy has been formulated on the premise of investigating the possibility of one or more major donations as the base for further individual acquisitions. The results of these investigations will be evaluated during the year and will lay the ground for future acquisitions. Before the governance structure of M+ is finalised, an interim acquisition committee is being planned, with the aim of being active before this summer.

Preparations for the M+ Design Competition

16. Over the past year, the M+ and Project Delivery team have developed a detailed schedule of accommodation and building programme for the museum building while at the same time being deeply engaged in the finalization of the Development Plan. The team is now preparing the brief and all related materials for the design competition, which is scheduled to be announced in the third quarter of 2012.

Stakeholder Engagement

17. Besides the large-scale stakeholder engagement and the series of stakeholder meetings that were held in February-March 2011, the M+ team has, over the years, organized a number of roundtable discussions as well as public forums and numerous talks in different contexts with the objective both to listen to stakeholders' views as well as to explain the developing vision for M+.

18. Besides these formal gatherings, the senior members of the M+ team have met stakeholders in one-to-one and small groups meetings – artists, designers, architects and filmmakers as well as curators, gallery owners, collectors and critics – to talk about the

plans for M+, and to listen to their views. The number of individuals that have been involved is estimated to be 1,200.

Audience Building

19. The main strategy for building audiences on a long-term basis is to organize pre-opening exhibition programmes on the WKCD site, in different parts of Hong Kong, and, after 2014, in the first of a series of Arts Pavilions that will be built in WKCD.

20. The first public project was the M+ Bamboo Theatre Exhibition and Bamboo Cinema, which attracted a lot of attention during the 2012 Chinese New Year period. Mobile M+: Yau Ma Tei will be the second project, taking place at six different sites in Yau Ma Tei during the period from 14 May to 10 June 2012. These two projects as well as other projects under planning have a strong education component, which will, over the years leading up to the opening of the M+ museum, secure growing knowledge about contemporary visual culture among the Hong Kong audience.

Publicity

21. Numerous interviews with the M+ staff have been published both in local Chinese and English media and internationally. The general media perception of M+ during the past year was positive.

**West Kowloon Cultural District Authority
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