



D-Dong's Response to
the Consultation on the West Kowloon
Cultural District

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1. Introduction to D-Dong

D-Dong is one of the few non-district-based youth organizations in Hong Kong. It was established by a group of high-calibre young people in 2010.

Our major focuses are issues related to youth culture and policies, and we release research reports regularly. All research is conducted in the most serious and professional manner. We are eager to increase the public awareness of youth problems and youth issues, and to recommend policies that are beneficial to the young people in Hong Kong.

Moreover, we encourage the young people to contribute to society and participate in various community activities. D-Dong is the ideal place for them to experience the joy of contributing to Hong Kong and China.

D-Dong is an elitist organization. All the members are carefully chosen in order to satisfy the demanding requirement of the organization.

D-Dong is a young group that constantly interacts with different arts groups and students in order to understand their needs and expectations to the West Kowloon Cultural District (WKCD), the flagship of Hong Kong Art in the future. This short but concise paper is intended to present our views on the software development of the WKCD.

2. Response to the Consultation

Cultural affairs increasingly occupy a prominent role in public policy making as the WKCD, the flagship of Hong Kong arts in the future, will go under construction in a few years of time. On the one hand, it signifies the rise of Hong Kong to become one of the international art and cultural hubs like New York, London and Paris. On the other hand, although the hardware of the WKCD is a gigantic construction project that contains first-class museums, theatres, concert halls, etc., the development of its software is at a relatively slow pace. This short but concise essay is intended to present my view on the software development vis-à-vis the future of the WKCD.

The hardware, such as the architectural planning and other facilities, is the “body” of the WKCD and the software the “soul”. By "software" I am referring to factors that are essential to sustain the WKCD, such as local artists (and their outputs), audiences and art collections. Other than art collections, many of the factors cannot be bought by money alone but require deliberate nurturing. Without a comprehensive and strategic development of the software, the WKCD will be anything but a success. A failure to fully incorporate the software to the hardware will very likely render the WKCD to a hollow shell and result in a significant waste of resources (in spite of the participation of private developers). If it is to turn out that the WKCD is unsustainable, it may deteriorate into just another business and exhibition centre and the original purpose completely abandoned. This we absolutely want to avoid.

The *Update on Software Development to Promote West Kowloon Cultural District* was submitted to the Legislative Council on 14 January 2011. We thereafter can find no more reports or updates related to software development of the WKCD. In the paper the Authority says: “A Creative Learning Unit will be established in 2011 to forge partnerships with community and arts groups and facilitate collaborations” and “[t]he Authority will be in a better position to report on more concrete plans and strategies after the establishment of the Creative Learning Unit.” From the documents we do not learn much about the working progress of the Creative Learning Unit, which was supposed to be established in 2011, and what it has achieved so far. And the “concrete plans and strategies” that the Creative Learning Unit was supposed to adopt remain rather vague. The Authority recognizes the importance of software but for some unknown reason the development of it lags behind. The Authority should not overlook software development in light of an ongoing enormous town planning project that includes a vast lushly area.

Indeed, I am very skeptical on how plausible that the Creative Learning Unit will ever achieve its objective, which is “to build and cultivate audience *in the next few years* to prepare the community for the advent of the cultural district.” (Italics added) As the first phase of M+ will be completed by 2017, I see a very slight possibility that the general public will acquire a taste for arts and learn to appreciate arts within a period of five years. M+, which is supposed to “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,” and which will be three times the size of Tate Modern,

will likely to remain rather foreign to the general public. The Authority should kick-off a comprehensive art program now, starting from the primary and secondary schools. Art should be interesting, but one cannot get interested in something unless she has learnt some basic knowledge of it. All in all, the success of the WKCD depends on whether the artistic nurturing of the general public can cope with the hardware development.

The Arts and Craft studios will be the cradle of some of the greatest local artists. In the paper it says: “The Arts and Craft studio will allow visual artists to produce art works in the district.” I want to point out that different types of visual artists need different sizes of studio. For instance, artists who do installations need larger areas to work on than ordinary painters. The design of the studios should take that into account and be built according to the needs of the users.

I pay particular attention to the nurturing of local artists because they are the lifeblood of Hong Kong arts. The WKCD should act as a springboard for the local artists to jump up to the international level. The completion of the WKCD is not only the biggest opportunity that the local artists have ever had but also the last desperate hope. For many years many local artists and performers have been living under difficult financial conditions, and thus their creativity, amount of output and quality of output hampered. I did pay a visit to the Fo Tan studios and found that while some of the more well-known artists were indubitably quite well off, most of the less famous artists, many of them still under thirty, were under very tight financial constraints and struggling to pursue a life of art. I met a very talented young artist who do exceptionally good oil paintings but live hand-to-mouth in light of the fact that art production had taken up most of his time. He did hold an art exhibition in Thailand despite all the hardships, as he told me, and sell some of his paintings there. But he feared that if one day he could not sell one painting in a month, or if he had to face an rent increase, he would no longer be able to rent the studio, that means quitting the art business altogether and a loss to Hong Kong arts. Many young artists have been wasted in this way before becoming masters. This example illustrates how fragile is the software for now. Inasmuch as many of them are struggling with their livelihoods, some of the more fortunate and talented local artists tend to look for better opportunities abroad. Hong Kong therefore loses them either way.

The nurturing of young local artists and local art lovers must go together hand in hand, for the art business will be floating in the air without supply and demand. Although the WKCD can still run itself if flocks of foreign visitors will go to M+ to view art pieces that are originally displayed in French museums and Broadway musicals that can also be watched in London and New York will be put onstage in WKCD, this is not going to be the ideal outcome. On the one hand, the WKCD will not be sustainable just by having local audiences; on the other hand the whole matter will be rendered meaningless if it is to fail to promote Hong Kong arts and culture to the world. That is why the city-park concept needs to be refined by putting in more local elements. Britart remains a major theme of the Tate Modern. I am not sure how many art pieces by Hong Kong artists are worthy to be displayed in M+ five years later. In spite of all the inadequacies, the Cantonese operas really shine as it has once been named by the *Time* magazine as “must see”. Therefore, from a strategic point of view, Cantonese operas should occupy WKCD just as Britart occupies Tate Modern until other art forms mature in Hong Kong.