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Extracts from speaking notes of Kevin Thompson, Hong Kong Academy for Performing Arts*.

How many times do we hear, “It’s the culture!” given as a reason for a failed initiative? And yet, a recent comparative study of cultural governance (2001) of three Cultural Districts in Colorado, Missouri and Pennsylvania¹, shows that cultural governance has emerged as an innovative and effective institutional and financial model by which to support local and regional cultural activities. It also suggests that successful performance of cultural governance relies on strategic coalitions between stakeholders, reciprocal city-district partnerships, and stable funding mechanisms.

And, size really does matter, in terms of a set of variables influencing the success of cultural districts. Proximity to ‘live’ issues is essential, and the size of the board has a direct correlation and positive impact on its success, together with closeness of interplay between partners, yet, and, seemingly paradoxical, an arms-distance relationship has positive impact on the areas innovative capacity. Perhaps, really no surprise.

There is also clear recognition of the need for, and value of, a healthy interdependence among all partners, especially among cultural providers.

Some would say it is Keynesian Economics which pulls artists to embrace interdependent scenarios; perhaps, the lure of artistic expression which draws private sector and government into Cultural District partnerships. Regardless of the source of this involvement, all would seem to concur that there is value in the interdependence that comes both in the form of planned, well thought-out development strategies, and free artistic expression.

In more practical terms, while stakeholders espouse independence, Cultural Districts are settings predisposed to sharing a confluence of talent pools. Additionally, programming synergies hold huge potential. Resources and materials can be acquired through scale economies, and strategies for growth and sustainability can flow easily and quickly between partners, if enabled and empowered by the Statutory Body.

So I guess the formula for success is far from straightforward. Here’s the rub: the spectre of numerous partners with varying agendas, driven by differing corporate structures and by a variety of institutional imperatives, all brought into close proximity in a Cultural District, is a truly frightening challenge in consensus building.

Yet, in Cultural Districts, a positive prospective of the eventual outcomes is almost too irresistible. Strategic management of investment and support of interdependence can help prefigure successful outcomes if brought together in an appropriately-sized², facilitative and empowered Cultural District board or Statutory Body, which demonstrates an

¹ M. Jae Moon University of Colorado, Denver

² University of Torino, Italy. 2002.

alertness, closeness of interplay, but also an arms-distance trust in various stakeholder sectors, be them Visual Arts, Performing Arts, NGOs, Government, Social, Cultural, Business Entrepreneurs and Private Sector.

The success of a Cultural District will, of course, be gauged both anecdotally, and monitored by benchmarking exercises, but generally would be seen by Hong Kong to be demonstrated quantitatively, by increased attendance, increased revenue, but also, I hope, qualitatively too, by increased public awareness and recognition of the importance of culture in all our lives.

An empowered, complementary, and facilitative board needs to understand just how culture drives performance, I guess it is an alloy of strategy and culture, and its connection with other drivers of performance, really the statutory body's role in building the corporate culture of the district itself, its responsibility for nurturing cultural software, and how it can connect and join with the rest of Hong Kong in its quest.

Perhaps more graphically, we can say, it needs to understand:

- how culture can eat strategy for lunch – the two must be symbiotic.
- the extent of the statutory body's "cultural sphere and nexus of influence"
- how to build culture through clarity, connectivity, and commitment to a rich variety of cultural identities, distinctiveness's we believe are important for Hong Kong in becoming a truly world and worldly city

Fundamentally, the role of the artist, of arts groups large and small, must be central to our concerns. It is those creators who can help the board deal with daily experience, and moreover the sheer pragmatics, in a transforming way.

This is no ordinary board. Repeat: no ordinary board. Hardly. It has an extraordinary task ahead of it. It needs to be extraordinarily transparent, empowered, shared and owned by the arts community, and the greater, distributed community around us.

This is an attractive proposition before us. Really attractive. It needs your support, and the board needs to be convened and begin to deliver with alacrity. PDQ.

You know, regeneration is always people-based, PEOPLE based, just, as the Chief Executive said, of strong governance.

Education and the rôle of an Academy will need to be at the centre of building cultural software, a crucible for cultural change. Successful cultural districts involve people-centred change, seamless educational articulation, and partnerships with all arts groups, strategic, governmental, public and private networks, and, just as importantly, involve holistic policy integration across all sectors, fundamentally joined-up thinking, cultural hub and spokes.

* The Director frequently speaks from notes and may depart from the speech as prepared.