

Hong Kong Cultural District

The Recommendation Report from the Consultative Committee on the Core Arts and Cultural Facilities of the West Kowloon Cultural District Groups leading to the current public consultation is blatantly contradictory – it sets out a policy objective of ‘encouraging diversified and balanced development’ and ‘ensuring a ‘common wealth’ accessible and affordable to the public at large, however, it then proposes placing a cluster of 16 venues on a podium, away from the public domain, managed with a motivation to maximize retail, entertainment and dining revenues, and designed to maximize tourism impact.

The cause of this contradiction is that the discussion over adding new territorial venues to Hong Kong has been cast in the straight jacket ‘only West Kowloon’.

All consultation since ’97 including by the latest appointed Consultative Committee and Advisory Groups leading to the current proposals were conducted under a mandate limited to ‘West Kowloon’.

Equally so, this Committee on West Kowloon Cultural District Development of the Legislative Council, has give too little thought to the issue of agglomeration and good urban planning as one can find only one single sentence devoted to this issue in your own reports.

This fact now severely undermines the legitimacy of the recommendation report, and the confidence that the community can have that this provides a robust road map for the sustainable development of arts and culture venues.

The risk that West Kowloon as a Cultural District turns into a white elephant is now greater then ever and ironically even more so now that there is no longer a single developer in charge (but burocrats encouraged by hand picked committees working under predefined mandates.)

One argument cited in the report is that clustering will enhance the tourism impact. When you visit Tokyo as a tourist do you only go to Ropongi? When you visit London, do you only visit West End?

Another argument is that the current venues lack a mix land use setting. When you walk out of the APA you get run over by cars, and you can’t get anywhere in your evening dress, and when you get out of the cultural centre, you need to crawl through a cumbersome puzzle of subways. It is suggested that by putting everything on a podium, that we resolve all our planning errors. That is blatantly false of course. The appropriate action is to resolve the problems surrounding the existing venues first, and then learn how to we can plan West Kowloon correctly.

However, not all is lost with this report, as it demonstrates consensus on the list of new territorial venues required in Hong Kong. This list is not much different from the list ten years ago, and these venues are long overdue. Missing in this initiative are the district venues required, but that is another matter.

More so, the solution can also be found in this report. By simply replacing WKCD with “Hong Kong” in the vision statement on page 78, it reads like one we can completely fully subscribe to:

Hong Kong as an integrated arts and cultural district, a cultural gateway to the Pearl River Delta, with a diverse and vibrant arts scene, with major initiatives to meet the long term infrastructure needs, fostering organic growth and improving quality of life with open, spacious and accessible harbour-fronts with diverse facilities.

It is fortunate that the funding has been de-linked from the land sales on West Kowloon, with the proposed single injection of funds. Now we urge that the last step is taken, and that is to de-link the development of arts and culture from West Kowloon, and to create a comprehensive plan for Hong Kong as a whole.

Following are some of the elements of such plan:

1. Privatize the Cultural Centre and Museum with a right to redevelop the harbour facing side of the structures for entertainment and dining, so that we can dine before or after the show with a view of the harbour without having to crawl through subways;
2. Allow the Central Police Station to be bought by a foundation not unlike the Fringe Club. Wealthy families have already offered HK\$500million to do so. Then let it be operated with black box theatres and galleries, improving the mix of land uses of Soho and LKF;
3. Ensure that the multifunctional stadium planned for Kai Tak is suitable for concerts, and not just sports – which is the major drawback of the Coliseum and Queen Elizabeth Stadium (and the World Expo for that matter);
4. Confirm the development and funding of additional venues linking the Arts Centre and APA with the waterfront, as identified in the Outline Zoning Plan, under the management of the APA;
5. Invest in enabling the Maritime Museum in Stanley, and the Sunbeam Theatre in North Point – as territorial venues;
6. And yes, do use West Kowloon for a number of a new (but fewer) signature venues, based on the proposed commercial financial model, managed by a trust or authority.

The benefits of comprehensive ‘Hong Kong Cultural District’ planning are:

- True diversity in funding and management of venues with each of these clusters of venues having their own unique management styles, enabling a variety of attitudes and cultural and arts expressions;
- Provide proper urban planning for the entire West Kowloon as a district and a neighbourhood, as well as improve mix use land planning for all other ‘creative districts’;
- A more balanced arts and culture development in Hong Kong, including making venues in a more gradual manner and sooner, rather than wait for West Kowloon;
- A ‘Hong Kong’ view would also bring greater clarity to the debate over institutional arrangements. The WKCDA is a venue management organisation which should compete with others venue managers and should be set up with the right mix of people to make be successful. However, the suggestions that we need to add cultural policy making to the WKCDA is wrong. Cultural policy making should take place above and beyond the WKCDA, the LCSD, the APA, the Fringe, the privatized TST management group, the Kai Tak venue management agency, and all other management teams. Government needs to let itself to be guided by a Cultural Commission, or a Cultural and Heritage Commission Version 2.

Chairman and Members, once we delete the ‘West Kowloon’ straight jacket from the this report and the debate over the development of venues in Hong Kong, we believe that there is a strong consensus on the development of arts and culture, the additional venues, the improvement of venue management, and the improvement of our urban planning and neighbourhood development, for the good of Hong Kong’s residents, and our visitors.

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