Subcommittee on West Kowloon Cultural District Development

Submission by the Hong Kong Academy for Performing Arts

WKCD: Future Development of Arts and Culture in Hong Kong – Part I

WKCD: Software Development – Part II

WKCD: Cultural Software – Part III

Cities are changing and evolving more and more rapidly as landscapes of difference, of identity, and of character and cultural value. These differences become inscribed in the physical typologies. Each city has its own DNA and it is necessary to work within that structure, however constituted.

The synergy of New York and Lincoln Center has come to symbolise a particular potent form of cultural genetic make-up, a living arts organism. It was one of the first integrated cultural quarters to be built. The trouble with setting a precedent, with being one of the first modern day integrated arts centres in the world, a perceived brand leader, a cultural landmark, is that the rest of the world has a habit of catching up, and, with rapid development over recent years by other leading cities in the US, and across the developed and developing world, is doing so at some speed.

Challenges faced by Hong Kong increase in complexity as the pace of change in society increases, with West Kowloon Cultural District, the community's largest investment in arts and culture, and the potential to develop a world-class integrated arts and cultural district, and to enrich the quality of life for Hong Kong people and neighbouring regions.

Artist-citizens can make significant and sustained impacts upon their communities. In essence, they work across many related sectors and in partnerships essential for their professional, artistic development and in their pursuit of practice. They see their role in terms of enhancing the quality of life in communities by contributing to the richness of their cultural *milieu*, by giving direction to community engagement activities, to inclusion policies, and can provide robust benchmarks for measuring their performance overtime in terms of social change through their community-based, school and tertiary arts activities.

In this way they give tangible form and function to the development of cultural software, and, in terms of Hong Kong, would be key contributors to the challenge of ensuring that it is a recognized leader in dynamically re-skilling for the burgeoning creative industries throughout the region.

A recent visit to New York, was in a very real sense conducting reconnaissance into the working model of Lincoln Center – gleaning insights into the likely development trajectory of a potential, integrated cultural district by studying how it has evolved in its 40 year history.

For instance, the almost continual reference to Lincoln Center as a 'campus', with, one assumes, connections - and all the future potential – encompassing a learning organism, of a research and development laboratory played out in vivo, with real life, top professionals contributing through their day-to-day work.

The idea too, of a one-stop-shop for patrons to benefit from close proximity of venues, like-minded, but differently orientated, arts within a central location, and opportunities for socialising with like-minded but differently orientated audiences and funding patrons – there is a correlation in some cities of arts patrons attending

one kind of activity being interested in another: contemporary music, contemporary dance and contemporary architecture, for example.

These are also initiatives taken from the centre – Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts - rather than any one constituent organisation within the campus, for cross-arts activity, for those opportunities to cater for interests which reside between existing organisations and art forms.

For example, the Center itself instigated Lincoln Center Chamber Music, and its popular Lincoln Center Jazz, programmes. And of course, the prospective synergy, cross production, interdisciplinary programming, central marketing primacy, ticketing, commonly shared software, and merchandising which is achievable within a truly integrated operation.

Content is king, of course, but context too is key and can enhance, can transform the ordinary into the extraordinary without trumping content. Decisions on content and context have deep social implications and can strengthen the link between artistic and cultural.

WKCD could go some way towards helping Hong Kong rediscover its potential, not just as a mirror for jet-set divas and visiting international talent - starchitecture rather than cultural architecture - but as a way of influencing thinking on development of cultural landscape and adding arts and cultural vitality to the quality of life of the whole of Hong Kong.

When Government, arts and cultural sector, teaching institutions and community team up, innovative solutions to some of the greatest challenges of our cities and communities are possible. Together we can build a pluralistic strategy which looks at how we work across all art form expressions and disciplinary boundaries to create a path to realize synergistic relationships, and develop our software potential, not simply in terms of employment but rather in light long term employability, a sustainable and rewarding quality of life, and one which looks beyond immediate imperatives to all our futures over the next 30 years. The opportunity exists to fashion a new paradigm for an integrated cultural district, one perhaps in a most innovative form. By working together, we can meet the global arts, community and education challenges of the future and the responsibilities of today to engage with Hong Kong's communities of tomorrow.

Professor Kevin Thompson
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More than strategy

As I listened to award-winning pianist Colleen Lee's performance recently, I could not help but reflect on the wonderful investment made in terms in 'software development', by providing essential support for such an outstanding young woman.

Similarly, there has been a 'small miracle' of software development in Venezuela. Venezuela, you may ask? Venezuela's music education, known as El Sistema, offers every willing child, no matter how poor, an instrument and free tuition. Currently, about 250,000 children take part.

This is not to create musicians per se, but seeks to develop notions of citizenship through values of responsibility, teamwork, respect and love of learning. There is consistent evidence showing, that children who receive music lessons, make greater progress across a wide range of areas, than those receiving no music lessons.

Development of cultural software for WKCD will hinge on a dynamic partnership between and at the intersection of education, locally-based practitioners, professional companies and creative industries, with HAB, with key arts organizations and companies, higher education institutions, and with neighbourhood and neighbouring communities of Hong Kong.

By supporting development of people – let's drop 'software' – Hong Kong could retune to some of the key, emerging demands and imperatives of today, to the changing needs of society, be responsive to its cultural hybridity and distinctiveness, so that it is truly representative of the diversity of its people. In doing so, it would make invisible lives visible, assist young people to move from skid row to real deal, just as some rather less developed countries have already done.

To some extent Hong Kong's centre of gravity has shifted too: so have our expectations, and realisation of the sorts of challenges faced, in preparing the cultural software for tomorrow's world.

At the same time as developed countries strive towards more inclusive societies, to those more socially engaged with greater communities, with urban regeneration, they also look to promoting arts and cultural as economic regenerators, as an attraction to cultural tourists, and to encourage the growth of creative industries and innovative business practices.

Rapid metropolitanism and the present economic boom have entailed intensifying the economic predisposition. Discontent of those living amidst urban redevelopment and in outlying areas has been made increasingly manifest.

New imperatives can all be cogently argued in societal and developing cultural terms. But the implications need to be addressed. Today's society has a significantly broadened view of the part the arts can play, as well as its view of a more inclusive and enhanced range of 21st century arts and lifestyles.

Charitable organisations, government, professionals, society and community at large, are today foreseeing a more defining role in terms of Hong Kong, one of serving a communal and social function, one integrated into the very fabric of all our lives and futures, one of greater significance and of strategic import to Hong Kong. Yet we retain today, many of the institutional frameworks of the past, concepts appropriately planned at the time, but inappropriately designed for the new order of today and tomorrow.

It is like inviting the academic gentlemen scholars of Brideshead Revisited's Oxford to provide for the age of mass higher education. It is like asking the Elizabethan owner of Shakespeare's 1599 Globe Theatre, James Burbage, who had obtained a 21 year lease, and built by the company in which Shakespeare had a stake, on the lease, construction and dimensions of West Kowloon Cultural District. It is more than a question of strategy. It is one of conception.

The arts can safeguard against the disorientation which accompanies rapid change and against an obsession with materialism and the 'littleness' of living. They can transform the world about us; hold a mirror to the 'thousand cracked mirrors of human potential', diversities and idiosyncrasies of our society and living culture.

Hong Kong must not allow itself to be left behind. Other Pacific Asia countries are actively progressing their cultural development with alacrity, led by an extraordinarily active tiger already advancing the cause of designing a future world city, a remapping of its cultural cartography.

Hong Kong too could be on the brink of converging streams: the development of community-based arts practice to support neighboorhood urban and cultural renewal.

Hong Kong's cultural transition needs grounded exchange between all parties, so that arts and culture become catalysts for new spheres of influence in the community, helping deliver international quality provision for WKCD and future cultural vision for Hong Kong.

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Here's to the creative ones

It does seem novel, if not somewhat anomalous, to refer to people as 'cultural software', more rarefied, perhaps, than the expression 'human resources'. Though this, too, appears, contrary, an odd way round, and no less inapt. People are much more than resources. Resourceful, creative, innovative people perhaps, but hardly merely resources. And, what about the divergents, the cultural brave-hearts, lateral thinkers and innovators who craft our world, change the way we see it, or shape its future progress through sheer dint of their unusual gifts, their rare knowingness, their perspicacity, their remarkable capacity to imagine, to dream, to dare, and, perhaps, at times to confound and exasperate.

Cultural hardware, may be, as John Ruskin said of architecture, "the inescapable art", as it shapes the lives of people who rarely pause think about it. Yet, shopping malls and totemic office buildings cannot alone symbolise the spirit or soul of a place, begin to represent the rich array of ways people might choose to inhabit their space, or to glimpse their values, and what they stand for, nor show the cultural ecology of their lives, in the way that the quality and richness of cultural software, more intrinsic 'positional' content, can.

A computer company, with a distinctive software culture of its own, once used some well-wrought copy to distill the essence of another kind of software development, and to help recognise it in just a few of its innumerable and myriad forms. From the live to the virtual, it relies on three resources: highly skilled people, intellectual capital, and creativity. Why should we care? Notwithstanding a duty of stewardship for succeeding generations to self-fulfil their potential to lead balanced and positive lives, and for society's collective wellbeing and lifestyles, even utilitarian arguments, let alone economic, societal and aesthetic ones, would recognize the value of creativity, the ability to think outside of, or expand our notion of, the frame, permeating all sectors of business, and service sectors, in terms of constant advancement, fiscal and social progress. WKCD could be a place where people fulfil their dreams, a driving force for future cultural growth and progress, so that people are attracted to Hong Kong, want to stay here and stimulate further cultural and economic prosperity. But to realise this vision, we must act now.

With so much depending on development of cultural software, that is creative and resourceful people, for WKCD, and the region's burgeoning creative industries, it is perhaps, worth reiterating the spirit of the qualities necessary to effect a cultural shift, and which are people, intellectually and creativity, intensive. It is time for change. Software re-engineering of a new order. Here's my somewhat bowdlerised, contemporary version of the text. Without being genetically modified, the message, if not the medium, being much the same. It is also one which stands the test of time:

Here's to the creative ones.

The oddballs.

The one-offs.

    The cranks.

        The radicals with cause.

Those who act, move, speak or see differently.

They may be uncaring of convention.

They may have no deference for conformity.

You can admire them, cite, or incite them,

    doubt them, lionize or malign them.

Just about the only thing you can't do is disregard them.

    Because they transform things.

They create. The re-create. They re-renew.

    They search. They research. They produce.

        They drive civilization forward.

Perhaps that's why they're oddballs.

How else can they look at a blank score and conceive a masterpiece?
    Or stare transfixed at roughly hewn marble and foresee a David?
    Or watch for hours as people move through space and conceive life's ballet more real than reality?

We make obstacles for these kinds of people.

While some see them as odd-balls,
we see talent.

Because the people who are odd-ball enough to believe
they can create a different kind of world, are the ones who do.

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