



Tel (852) 2584 8658
Fax (852) 2584 8739
Email philipsoden.dir@hkapa.edu

26 January, 2005

The Honourable Mr Lau Wong-fat
Chairman
LegCo Panel on Planning, Lands and Works
Legislative Council Building
Central, Hong Kong

Dear Mr Lau,

Re: West Kowloon Cultural District (WKCD)

The Hong Kong Arts Administrators' Association has formed a focus group on West Kowloon Cultural District to monitor and comment on developments in the implementation of the project. We submitted a position paper on WKCD to Government in March of 2004 – the attached document represents the Association's latest thinking on WKCD and on the alternative ideas about its implementation that have come forward recently.

The views expressed in the attached position paper were unanimously endorsed by Association members attending our Annual General Meeting last Saturday.

Yours sincerely

Philip Soden
Convenor, Focus Group on WKCD

cc Chief Secretary for Administration, the Hon. Mr Donald Tsang Yam-kuen JP
Secretary for Home Affairs, the Hon. Dr Patrick Ho Chi-ping;
Legislative Council Representative for the Functional Constituency of Sports,
Performing Arts, Culture and Publications, the Hon. Mr Timothy Fok GBS JP;
Chairman and Members, Hong Kong Arts Development Council;
Chairman and Members of the Committee on Performing Arts;
Chairman and Members of the Committee on Museums;
Deputy Secretary for Home Affairs (Culture), Ms Lolly Chiu;
Director and DD(C) of Leisure and Cultural Services Department

**HONG KONG ARTS ADMINISTRATORS' ASSOCIATION
POSITION PAPER ON WEST KOWLOON CULTURAL DISTRICT
26 JANUARY 2005**

INTRODUCTION

The integrated town planning approach adopted by Government for WKCD now appears to be at risk in the increasingly politicized debate about the number of developers that should be involved. This question, which has nothing to do with arts and culture, has diverted attention from the positive benefits of the cultural hub proposal, and from substantive issues of concern to the arts community and society at large.

'HARDWARE FIRST' vs. 'ORGANIC GROWTH'

At recent consultative forums about WKCD, attention has been drawn to the apparent inconsistency between the Government's hardware-first, all-at-once approach, and community-led organic cultural growth over time. However, as far as the performing arts are concerned, the need for the mandatory WKCD performing venues has been clearly established by two separate consultancies into the utilization of existing performance venues (1998 and 2002). Local and overseas venue hirers are already having difficulty securing bookings in 2005 and 2006 - by the time WKCD has opened, the shortage of centrally located performance venues serving a territory-wide audience may have become critical.

Other non-core facilities included in the short-listed WKCD proposals, such as arts educational facilities, permanent homes for the professional performing companies and affordable studio / exhibition space for local artists, can also be easily justified on the basis of present needs.

On the museum side, two of the facilities proposed for WKCD, namely the Museum of Modern Art and Museum of Ink, have arisen from previously expressed community expectations and are also recommended in the Culture and Heritage Commission's cultural policy blueprint (2002). The other two (Moving Image and Design) are thematic museums based on popular culture and should have no problem attracting visitors, given that over 3.5 million people visited LCSD museums last year. Subtracting from this total the attendance at non-cultural museums (Space, Science, Coastal Defence and Railway) there are 2 million visitors per annum to Hong Kong's existing arts and cultural museums. The myth that Hong Kong's museums are poorly attended and that the WKCD museums will therefore be white elephants, should be laid to rest here and now. Moreover, there is an eight to ten year lead-time before the WKCD museums will be opened. On present trends there is no doubt that visual arts education and community appreciation of the arts will develop further during that time.

It is clear that the West Kowloon cultural facilities, as defined in the Government's invitation for proposals, are largely catching up with previously identified needs and existing community expectations, rather than leaping into the dark ahead of organic growth, as suggested by some opponents of the project. Indeed, additional space should be set aside at WKCD for unspecified future facilities to accommodate organic cultural growth, but this allocation of space does not appear to have been included yet in the short-listed proposals.

CONSTRUCTION IN PHASES

As West Kowloon is in step with present needs, there is no compelling reason to construct it in several phases over time, as some have suggested. However, if the cultural facilities at WKCD were constructed in phases, the already completed facilities in the district would be surrounded by a seemingly endless succession of noisy, dusty, visually intrusive construction sites for 10-15 years after the initial opening. Public amenity and enjoyment of the cultural facilities, piazzas, open-air exhibition spaces and gardens, would be seriously compromised for as long as it took to complete the various phases.

ASIA'S WORLD CITY vs. MULTIPLE DEVELOPERS

If West Kowloon is to contribute to Hong Kong's claim to be Asia's world city, then its cultural facilities need to be nothing less than world class in terms of design, performance outputs and modes of governance. However, the recent calls for the involvement of multiple developers, while well-intentioned, would inevitably lower standards in terms of conflicting architectural styles and disintegrated planning, not to mention the considerable difficulties in overall site coordination that would arise with multiple developers involved.

Connectivity and interfacing between separately developed facilities would also be problematic. If Government had to pick up responsibility for the common areas between the buildings, the area might take on a municipal tone which, while fulfilling basic requirements, would lack the vibrancy and systemic vision conveyed in the short-listed proposals from some of the world's leading architects. It should be noted that at least one of the three short-listed proposals has already won a prestigious international architecture award based on criteria such as contribution to world architectural culture; invention and imagination; respect for people, the planet and context; environmental awareness; and appropriateness.

GOVERNANCE

At present there appears to be a widely-held misconception that the successful WKCD developer will be 'running' the cultural facilities from a position of cultural ignorance. However, the modes of governance proposed by each of the short-listed WKCD proponents generally follow world's best

practice. The proposals typically include independent boards or trusts, mainly comprising arts professionals in the fields of visual and performing arts, as well as community, government and artist representatives, to oversee the management of the cultural facilities.

On the other hand, if each cultural museum and theatre were built and operated by a separate developer, the governance of the site as a whole could become complicated and unmanageable. The duplication of management structures and loss of economies of scale would mean less money for art due to higher administrative overheads. It would be more difficult to arrange synergetic activities, complementary programming and to coordinate and integrate operations amongst facilities. In an extreme case, the district could rapidly deteriorate into a piecemeal, poorly coordinated affair - an international embarrassment rather than a landmark proudly proclaiming Asia's world city.

FUNDING MODELS

The involvement of multiple developers would require a different funding model from that envisaged in the Government's Invitation for Proposals. A number of scenarios have been put forward, none of which is ideal.

Any funding model that channels revenue from the commercial aspects of the site through Government's hands back to the cultural facilities on the site, would be prone to political interference on an annual basis and could place the cultural facilities on a shaky footing in future years. Compared with 30 years of guaranteed funding from the WKCD developer, Government involvement in the funding chain is clearly not a desirable arrangement from the arts community's point of view. It would also perpetuate the Government's current monopoly on the funding of arts facilities. This outcome would be inconsistent with the Culture and Heritage Commission's cultural policy blueprint for the future which calls for greater private sector involvement in arts provision and for Government to gradually move towards the role of facilitator, rather than provider, of culture.

Some have suggested the establishment of a statutory authority to receive funds from multiple developers and disburse funds to cultural facilities on site. However, it would be a case of the tail wagging the dog if an otherwise unnecessary and expensive statutory structure were set up purely to facilitate the involvement of multiple developers, bearing in mind the downgrading of the overall project quality, loss of integrated planning and problematic governance that such involvement would inevitably bring about.

Provided that there are sufficient safeguards built into the contractual relationship between Government and a single developer, there does not seem to be any redeeming argument to justify the involvement of multiple developers in creating or operating the cultural facilities at WKCD, apart from a perception of spreading the wealth a little further among the developers.

However, that should neither be the concern nor the objective of this project, especially if it runs the risk of compromising its quality.

It is incumbent upon the Government to negotiate the best possible return for the public purse from the WKCD developer. On the other hand, the project must also remain economically viable throughout the land lease period. Even though the Government has the right to re-possess the cultural facilities in the event of developer default, it would become a burden on taxpayers if the facilities were not a going concern at the time of re-possession. Government should therefore pay close attention to the developers' financial forecasts for the cultural facilities, especially with regard to their operating costs and whether the funds guaranteed by the developer are sufficient for the operation and upkeep of the cultural facilities for 30 years. The developers' parent companies should also be required to make guarantees and provide bonds to ensure their performance over the lease period.

There should be full public disclosure of the financial details of the three short-listed proponents' bids as well as the financial outcome of the negotiation phase. However, such disclosure should only take place after the successful conclusion of negotiations, otherwise the Government would have no leverage in the negotiations if each developer knew in advance what the others had bid.

ICONIC ARCHITECTURE

On the subject of the canopy, there is no denying its iconic value. Cultural facilities around the world vary in their international public profile and contribution to the local tourism industry almost in direct relationship to the 'iconicity' of their architecture. The Pompidou Centre, I.M. Pei's pyramid at the Louvre, Frank Gehry's Guggenheim at Bilbao and the Sydney Opera House are examples of iconic architecture that have given the underlying cultural facilities a higher profile in the international arena than would otherwise have been the case.

But on a more practical level, Hong Kong has precious little open space for its citizens to enjoy, and even then the open spaces are only really enjoyable for a few months of each year because the extremes of climate drive people indoors at other times. West Kowloon will be providing a significant injection of green space. If the canopy can mitigate temperature extremes (5 degrees cooler in summer, according to one proponent) and offer year-round enjoyment and utility of the open spaces under it, then it makes sense from a public amenity point of view, and that makes sense for the cultural district.

More passing trade means better financial viability for the site as a whole, both for its commercial and cultural aspects. Exposing the general public, especially young people, to the open-air cultural attractions on the site such as the water amphitheatre, street performances, pavement artists and open-air art exhibitions, will stimulate by osmosis the organic growth of

appreciation of the arts in Hong Kong, while developing the audiences and arts-lovers of the future.

STAFF TRAINING PRIOR TO OPENING

With a number of performing and visual arts facilities coming on line at WKCD in a relatively short span of time, attention should be given to training / re-training of local candidates for artistic, administrative and operational posts at WKCD during the next eight years. The Government should negotiate with the successful proponent to fund the provision of such training, and relevant education providers should be placed on notice with regard to anticipated needs in terms of skill sets and numbers of personnel required.

NON-CORE ARTS AND CULTURAL FACILITIES

Each of the short-listed proposals has suggested a different configuration of non-core arts and cultural facilities over and above the mandatory requirements. In order that West Kowloon is as inclusive as possible, the Government should negotiate with the successful proponent to include the most desirable features of each short-listed proposal, as well as any broadly-supported additional facilities that are proposed by the community during the current public consultation phase.

The availability of space for such minor additions is clearly not a problem in a 40 hectare site. Here are some issues to be considered during negotiations:

- ② Facilities to preserve and develop indigenous culture (e.g. Cantonese Opera, Chinese Dance and Chinese Traditional / Folk Music).
- ② Additional space to be set aside within the district to accommodate as yet unspecified facilities arising from future organic cultural growth
- ② Affordable studio / exhibition space for visual and cross-media artists
- ② Designated areas for lease by related Creative Industry SME's (e.g. recording studios, design companies)
- ② Arts educational facilities, including indigenous culture
- ② Arts information / resource centre
- ② Permanent home bases for professional performing companies
- ② A purpose-built 600-800 seat concert hall designed for chamber music
- ② Training of candidates for artistic, administrative and operational posts

CONCLUSION

WKCD has the potential to exert far-reaching positive influences on the quality of life in our society. It would be a tragic loss to future generations of local artists, and to Hong Kong society as a whole, if the Government were to allow this major strategic development to become conceptually fragmented or de-railed altogether as a result of ill-informed commentary and political interference.