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The Honourable Mrs Rita Fan
Chairman of LegCo
The Legislative Council Building
8 Jackson Road, Central
Hong Kong
By email : pi@legco.gov.hk & Fax : 2537 1851

Dear Mrs Fan,

West Kowloon Cultural District

I should wish to reiterate Academy support for the West Kowloon Cultural District project following deliberations of the Consultative Committee, the public engagement process and subsequent discussions in Legislative Council.

As draft legislation to enact West Kowloon Cultural District Authority and funding application reach final stages, I would wish to make the following points for forthcoming meetings:

18 June – Seeking approval from LegCo's Public Works Sub-Committee of Finance Committee for upfront endowment of \$21.6 billion to finance capital costs of WKCD

2 July – LegCo's passage of legislation for setting up West Kowloon Cultural District Authority

4 July – Approval from LegCo's Finance Committee for upfront endowment of \$21.6 billion for capital costs of WKCD

I am reassured too that the conversation of a more creative Hong Kong continues unabated not with acquiescence. It is therefore important to approach the next stages not with closed nor fixed minds but openly.

Further, I would wish to lend support for a one-off, up-front endowment. The authority needs to be in the very vanguard of developing its strategic objectives and long-range

Dance 舞蹈 Drama 戲劇 Music 音樂 Film & Television 電影電視 Theatre & Entertainment Arts 舞台及製作藝術 Cantonese Opera 粵劇

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planning, albeit a vanguard with necessary safeguards in place¹. Real and substantial challenges lie ahead in the immediate and medium term future if the Authority is to begin to fulfill its ambitious mandate of WKCD becoming internationally acknowledged amongst the best.

Laudible good intentions need driving through from conception to completion. They have necessarily to travel at speed without undue need for looking over shoulders. An up-front grant would put down an unambiguous marker of serious intent and signal Hong Kong's collective strength of conviction in the necessity of strengthening its arts and cultural life².

What happens as a result of all our meetings on WKCD is as yet undecided but the consultation exercise itself will have fuelled a lot of creative energy, creative tension, creative dissonance, and it is simply not practical to try to resolve these entirely. They have to be lived with and worked through.

I hope, however, that the new agency will be humble. And not sit up there Ex Cathedra, representing the arts. Arts need no representation other than presentation in their own terms, but they do need advocates and celebrants at board level.

WKCDA has the potential to help the whole of Hong Kong. It must stay in touch with the fizz, buzz and creativity of the arts; it has to do, if it is to find itself engaged, if it is to champion it in the community, the region and to the rest of the world. Building that into an Authority might sound like an oxymoron but wouldn't it wonderful if we were able to pull it off.

The potential of WKCDA goes beyond the district and could validate arts and culture beyond the remit of WKCDA itself, to stimulate something deeper, more fundamental for the whole of Hong Kong. So in that sense, I hope it is not simply an agency but tackles a deeper and longer-term task.

We do not have to own it. Everyone must have a sense of shared ownership. The Authority has to be both advocate and celebrant in one. If it is not, it will simply become a bureaucracy.

WKCDA has the potential to facilitate a kaleidoscope of what is going on, part of mapping a developing cultural map of Hong Kong, so that local groups can plug in to their own interests, especially to those things tucked under the radar.

It has to engage with the psyche of Hong Kong culture, with its creative landscape. We can think of it as what might be called a *trust of confluence*; it looks for ways of combining and optimizing international and local arts talent to give of their best under the most conducive conditions.

¹ The National Centre for Popular Music in Sheffield opened in 1999 with 11 million of the City Council's money and closed the next year. It is now a student building.

² New York City spends more on arts annually than the whole of the National Endowment for Arts' 131 million.

Brian McMaster, former Director the Edinburgh Festival said recently: Arts Boards must be custodians of risk and innovation. Yet the very rigid doctrine of board appointments is hardly conducive to these. Arts boards, like artists themselves, may not wear business suits. And, perish the thought, we have to bring a few heretics into the tent, to challenge, to subvert, bring outsiders inside without their becoming insiders.

Similarly, the Authority needs to understand the people coming into our theatres, concert halls and museums and exhibitions, understand just how the arts are impacting on their lives.

So that whilst what is presented might integrate and mix organically arts, residential and business sectors – the Authority is actually about buildings, seating, infrastructure, and whether members of the audience can filter in before taking up their seats and relax, not corralled until last minute in an unprepossessing crush hall, whether they can linger afterwards and talk about what they have experienced.

The Authority needs licence to take risks, to stimulate, to challenge accepted thinking. There's a real understandable fear of letting go, of anything going wrong. Licence is loaded word, of course, but this is not to be licensed as a risk taker, risk takers don't wait to be licensed – rather to allow for the risk of the arts, the resolute and risqué and to safeguard them.

Graham Green said the arts must never be co-opted by the state. Disloyalty is a primary virtue of the artists. I would like to think we are big enough and magnanimous enough to allow disagreement, to not always march in step with prevailing views.

There are perhaps just three guiding concepts: Culture–Creativity–and like corresponding pages in the SCMP, Hong Kong, National and International.

And we can't simply feel by appointing a matched set to the Authority, "everything will be fine, that the right people are running it". It has to be a voice that is distinctive, give Hong Kong a voice in the world.

This is a pivotal moment for Hong Kong, with all the potential for, and risk of, media coverage around the world. We have to have and continue to have the right kind of debate about this. This represents a real, maturing moment for Hong Kong.

And there's the 'arm's length principle': the Authority's responsibility to curate arts and culture, not engage with artistic decisions. Those are sacrosanct.

As a result of all the discussion, consultation and deliberation. I can say that there seems to be a fresh breeze blowing through Hong Kong, a refreshingness about cultural nationals, political nationals and cultural self-determination.

Just as that becomes a totalizing process in the greater world it is perhaps manifest best through arts and culture and the trust we put in this new Authority.

Good governance and reputation are inextricably linked. The reputation of the Authority flows from the capacity of its governance, the integrity of its management, its rigorous financial reporting. These are key parameters.

The dictionary explains that the word 'governance' as being developed from a Greek word 'kuberna' which means to steer. Steer, initial term members of the Authority ought to serve staggered tenures in order to ensure continuity, stability, and a sense of residual memory.

We need people to whom culture is a value belief, want to do everything within their power to ensure Hong Kong has a cultural climate of which to be proud. With LegCo approval, I have every confidence this can be achieved.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Kevin Thompson', written in a cursive style.

Professor Kevin Thompson
Director