

Legislative Council

Panel on Home Affairs and Panel on Development

Joint Subcommittee to Monitor the Implementation of the West Kowloon Cultural District Project Meeting : 19 June 2009

PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT

The following are the personal views of Nicholas and Margaret Brooke.

We are very much in favour of well structured, constructive ongoing public engagement i.e. public engagement is not just a one off “consultation” – the community should have input at the various stages of the project, that is now at the start as a lead up to the Concept Plan, feed back to facilitate finalisation of the preferred Concept Plan and the subsequent Development Plan, as well as at later stages as the inevitable changes to this Plan are discussed and implemented.

The overall objective of public engagement should be to identify the majority preference within the community AFTER those “engaged” have had the opportunity to inform themselves adequately of the key issues involved. It is not to secure buy-in to a pre-conceived plan or proposal (put forward by a limited group of people, whether Government or others) from those who have not had any previous input and who have not have the opportunity to become fully informed of the associated issues. Too often the latter has been the objective in Government “consultations” and so the process of public engagement needs to be approached carefully so as to avoid distrust and criticism.

The engagement process requires careful design so that it cannot be accused of trying to secure a desired outcome – this means that not only have the issues to be defined within as few constraints as possible but also the analysis of responses to those issues has to be seen to be even handed and not biased in any way towards a particular conclusion. In our view the Central Waterfront engagement process has been undermined as it is viewed by many as having been structured in such a way that genuine concerns can be rejected as either being outside the scope of the engagement parameters or overridden by comments secured via different survey methodologies.

According to public survey best practice, securing data via different methods is acceptable; however, conflating data obtained by different methods into a single set of assertions or a single index is not – like has to be compared with like. So that data obtained during face to face interviews, for example, should not be mixed with data obtained by telephone as is often the case in Government engagement initiatives. It can be compared but the interactions are different and so the results will be different – for instance visually based data, such as project designs or how a design fits within a specific setting, cannot be determined over the phone. Similarly, one type of data cannot be weighted against the other and each approach should be carried out during the same timeframe so that there cannot be any risk that say, a subsequent telephone survey focuses on specific issues or views which have arisen during earlier public meetings and which the survey promoter wishes to dilute or override.

In the case of West Kowloon, it is suggested that a series of focus groups be held prior to formulation of the initial engagement materials in order to gain insight into the optimum way to

frame issues, and to identify likely concerns, trade off's and contingencies. Such focus groups should be broadly representative of the community at large.

Particular care needs to be taken in designing any "wish" or "response" pro-formas so that they are not seen to be "guiding" respondents in any way – the whole idea is to really find out what people think, not to lead them in a pre-conceived "policy" direction. This will assist in identifying the true concerns so that concept plans can address these adequately from the start and secure community buy-in as the project proceeds – and so mitigate the risk of months of work yet again being made abortive due to community rejection of proposals, cost or programme.

It should be borne in mind that the majority of people in Hong Kong want to see the city prosper, to see it succeed and to be the best – and any engagement process should be designed and conducted within this context. Suggestions and proposals which have broad support should be given serious consideration as a development such as West Kowloon will rely first and foremost on the local community for its future success.

Nicholas and Margaret Brooke
June 2009