

25 February 2009

The Honourable Ip Kwok-him
Chairman of the Joint Subcommittee
Legislative Council
Legislative Council Building
8 Jackson Road
Central, Hong Kong

Dear Mr Ip,

Re: Panel on Home Affairs and Panel on Development – Joint Subcommittee to Monitor the Implementation of the West Kowloon Cultural District Project

With reference to the letter of 9 February 2009, I wish to thank the Joint Subcommittee for inviting the Hong Kong Academy for Performing Arts (“the Academy”) to submit its views on aspects concerning implementation of the WKCD project. The Academy is charged with responsibility for professional education, training and research in performing, theatre and entertainment arts, film and television. This being so, the Academy would wish to comment specifically on these and upon development of cultural software.

The Academy would wish to give weight to three issues in particular: the importance of children and young people being a centrepiece of WKCD (Leonard Bernstein, who was a driving force behind establishment of Lincoln Center, built on the site of slums, insisted on Juilliard being at the centre),

Accessibility, engagement and sense of shared ownership with community,

And, iconography deriving from within - through the integrity and quality of design fit-for-purpose, in short, of being designed ‘from the inside out’.

The Academy believes in the importance of audience-building and in nurturing next generation participants, audiences, and community cultural development, in short, a cultural commonwealth. The Academy has produced more than 3,000 graduates over the past twenty-five years. They have key roles as performing artists, arts managers, production staff and teachers. Altogether, they are contributing steadily to arts and cultural development for Hong Kong. Lately, establishment of the Performing Arts Education Centre has enabled the Academy to implement focused, strategic community engagement activities. School children, young people and public are experiencing performances first-hand, interactively engaging and integrating them with education and with their quality of life. In this perspective, the WKCD

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venues need be designed to enable facilities for community engagement and as an interface for public encounter with arts practice in the round.

The WKCD offers an opportunity for venues to be operated and managed in ways of venue operation which differ from those is currently adopted in Hong Kong. The panel should consider full in-house management and production crew who have theatre-trained backgrounds and who are resident staff, rather than the current practice of using/relying on the services of EMSD, LCSD, PCCW and others. The sense of ownership of a venue among its staff makes a palpable difference to the quality of service provided to end users.

In addition to the venue itself, a number of Hong Kong Companies would greatly benefit from being resident within, or alongside, their own theatre venue. This should not stop or prevent Companies from touring around the region, but would offer them a residence from where they could build a committed audience base and where locals or tourists might expect to see (for example), a ballet. There is nowhere in Hong Kong that provides this on a nightly basis. Hong Kong Ballet has been described as a ‘nomad Company’, always on the road with no home. However, given a theatre venue and proper rehearsal/office facilities as a home, the venue would have to be professionally operated and managed within the performing Company itself – and not in the form of outsourced staff.

The School of Theatre & Entertainment Arts at the HKAPA, maintains close contact with the Entertainment industry in Hong Kong through its External Advisory Committee. Membership includes representatives from companies such as Hong Kong Disneyland, Hong Kong Repertory Theatre Company, City Contemporary Dance Company, Leisure & Cultural Service Department (LCSD), Electrical & Mechanical Service Department (EMSD) and others, plus a number of the prominent Support Industries. Contact with the industry at this level has helped the School to design a curriculum which provides human software to work within Hong Kong’s Entertainment Industry and encompasses the academic requirements of comprehensive theatre music, dance, and music-theatre programmes.

The School is fully aware of the developments currently taking place within the cultural arts and entertainment sectors of Hong Kong and the region, plus developments that are proposed to take place over the next five to ten years that include the development of WKCD. Responding to short to medium term needs, and addressing production personnel shortages, the School of Theatre and Entertainment Arts (TEA) launched a series of Fast-track programmes this year in the areas of Technical Management, Lighting, Sound, Property Making and Scenic Painting.

In addressing certain industry trends for multi-skilled production personnel, within the remodeling of its BFA degree to the 4-year format, the School of TEA is broadening students’

exposure to different disciplines within the School. We believe this will greatly benefit graduates seeking employment not only in the current job environment, but also when WKCD comes on-line with its diversity of venues (which must include studio theatre ‘fail-forward’ and experimental spaces) and events. For example, each of the three Departments of the School of TEA now incorporates several areas of study where students work across disciplines: Design (set & costume design, costume construction, property making, scenic painting and set construction); Entertainment Design & Technology (Lighting, Sound, Technical Management/Direction); Arts, Event & Stage Management.

In terms of higher degrees, the Academy now offers taught Master’s programmes across four Schools, including the aforementioned areas of Design, Entertainment Design & Technology and Arts & Event Management. These programmes have courses in which leading-edge technologies are deployed as in many of today’s (and future) performing arts venues. The Academy is seeking to develop culture through quality programmes, through nurturing potential, through humanware, to try to envision and enable sustainable development of software and cultural capital in WKCD and the Pearl River Delta, and in response to the cultural imperatives, providing specialist personnel (human software) required to run and manage performing arts and subsidiary venues on the one hand, and on the other in response to a larger social agenda serving society’s needs today and tomorrow.

In terms of capital development, the WKCD project will have positive effects on the development of performing arts in Hong Kong and the Pearl River Delta.

Conditions and Facilities

Public spaces in integrated arts complexes must be designed to be a pleasure to be in – both for the artists and the audience – so that they become a magnet for communal meeting and casual gatherings. London’s South Bank complex is a well-known meeting place and a centre of community in a way that none of Hong Kong’s arts clusters are currently. It should not be necessary to add to this that the acoustics, sound isolation, climate control, internal aesthetics, external amenities and general feeling of well-being are crucial to the success of a cultural complex. How well it welcomes the audience – whether the regular visitor, the cultural tourist, the student, school-child or the casual visitor for the first time – will have a great effect on whether the experience is repeated and regularised. Public spaces of this nature need to be places that audience members and performers alike feel a warmth for, and eventually should feel their very own.

Hong Kong Academy for Performing Arts and West Kowloon Cultural District

Edo de Waart suggested that in building WKCD, the designers should include a carefully thought out School of Music to be incorporated into the culture of the development. “Where better” he suggested “to have the future musicians of Hong Kong than growing

within the same complex as the performers". New York's Lincoln Centre, London's Barbican Centre and many others around the world bring the musical youth and musical practitioners together in this way. Rehearsals can be attended more readily by students if they are on the doorstep. Professors can more readily come across from the Concert Hall to the teaching rooms if they are included in the same complex.

The same case can be made for professional training in dance, drama and Chinese traditional theatre.

The Academy has outgrown its space in Wanchai, not only for what is needed now, but for what will be required in the future, an Academy with an international reputation for the quality of its students, its teaching, its facilities and its spirit.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Kevin Thompson". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal stroke at the end.

Professor Kevin Thompson
Director