

For discussion on
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Legislative Council
Panel on Development and Panel on Home Affairs
Joint Subcommittee to Monitor the Implementation of the
West Kowloon Cultural District Project

Update on Venue Operations
of the West Kowloon Cultural District

PURPOSE

This paper provides Members with an update on the operation of venues in the West Kowloon Cultural District (WKCD).

BACKGROUND

2. In 2019, WKCD successfully progressed from the project planning and construction phase into the operation phase as two major performing arts venues were commissioned in the same year. The Xiqu Centre, the first performing arts venue in WKCD, had its Grand Opening on 20 January 2019, while Freespace started operation in June. Both venues offer world-class facilities for arts and cultural performers to showcase their talent and realise their dreams. They also serve as new platforms to provide more opportunities for arts and cultural audiences as well as the public to learn, appreciate and enjoy the many diverse artistic programmes.

3. During this early stage of operation, the West Kowloon Cultural District Authority (WKCDA or the Authority) constantly reviews its practices to enhance the facility offerings and services to ensure the delivery of professional venue services and experiences for performers, venue hirers, arts and cultural professionals, programme and event participants and tourists, as well as local visitors of all ages and backgrounds. As more arts and cultural facilities come into operation, the Authority will continue to enhance and advance its resources and capabilities to achieve the

optimum operational efficiency for each facility.

ACCESSIBILITY

4. WKCDA is committed to making WKCD an inclusive and accessible place for everyone. The Authority has actively engaged the disability community in the design process for venue facilities. Following the creation of a dedicated Accessibility Team in 2016, the Authority launched a policy on universal accessibility in June 2018 which established a central Accessibility Office to enhance accessibility standards on a district-wide level. The WKCDA Accessibility Policy covers both hardware and software accessibility, including physical environment and facilities, information accessibility, access services for programmes and stakeholder consultation with people with disabilities.

5. WKCDA works closely with Arts with the Disabled Association Hong Kong and the Hong Kong Council of Social Services. WKCDA also reports to the Sub-committee on Access of the Rehabilitation Advisory Committee and the Labour and Welfare Bureau on a regular basis in respect of building design and progress on access-related matters.

6. All building works and facilities of WKCD comply with the accessibility provisions as prescribed by the Design Manual Barrier Free Access 2008. The Authority is endeavouring to work beyond the minimum compliance to strive for best practices by introducing new access facilities that enhance the customer experience. Stakeholder consultations on accessibility provisions are arranged during the design process of our venues. Access audits and visits by disability groups were arranged to collect comments for improvement. Key examples of access provision at WKCD are listed in **Annex 1**.

7. Access services are also provided to accompany programmes at WKCD on a scheduled or on-request basis, and reasonable accommodations could be made upon request. To enhance engagement and empower people with disabilities, the Authority has engaged people with disabilities during the planning process and promotion of some of its programmes. Key examples of access services and initiatives are listed in **Annex 2**.

8. WKCDA also cares about the digital needs of people with disabilities. The WKCD website conforms to the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG) 2.0 standard and the Level AA conformance to the maximum extent possible. It has received the Triple Gold Award in the Web Accessibility Recognition Scheme 2018/19, organised by the Hong Kong Internet Registration Corporation Limited, and co-organised by the Office of the Government Chief Information Officer. WKCDA is working to enhance the website's accessibility to conform to the WCAG 2.1 international standard.

TICKETING SERVICE

9. WKCDA runs an in-house ticketing system. Customers can purchase tickets of programmes showing at WKCD venues through various platforms including online, by phone, at WKCD venues, the Academy of Performing Arts and designated Tom Lee Music stores.

10. Since the ticketing system began operation in November 2018, more than 150 000 tickets have been issued as of mid-December 2019. Online ticket purchase through the in-house ticketing system is free of service charge and is playing a significant role with 46% of the total tickets issued sold online. The demand for purchase through external physical outlets remains low, accounting for only 3.5% of all ticket sales.

11. Online ticket sales grew strongly among traditional xiqu audiences, accounting for 36% for the Grand Theatre and 60% for the Tea House Theatre. For one of the recent xiqu performances in the Grand Theatre, 80% of available tickets were sold online. For Freespace, a younger demographic has met online sales to average 78%. Concessionary tickets are available for specific groups including senior citizens, students, customers on income support and patrons with access requirements.

12. Having an in-house ticketing system allows the Authority to better serve its customers. It enables WKCDA to expand its electronic mailing list (140 000 names segmented by interest as of December 2019) thereby making marketing programmes more

efficient, which in turn helps boost online sales and increase business efficiency, reduce queues at the ticket office, help safeguard against ticket touting and enhance customers' ticket purchase experience.

13. The in-house ticketing system also allows WKCDA to proactively and efficiently communicate with ticket holders on the latest show arrangements including event rescheduling and cancellation due to unexpected scenarios such as transportation disruption brought about by recent social events.

14. To drive visitation, WKCDA's Ticketing Team works with external ticket and travel agents in Hong Kong and Mainland China. One of WKCDA's key targets is to develop new ticketing channels via WeChat mini-programmes in 2020 in anticipation of the large number of tickets available for the opening of M+ and the Hong Kong Palace Museum.

VENUE HIRE

15. WKCDA supports the long-term development of the arts scene in Hong Kong and each venue in WKCD carries its own artistic mission and identity. Venue hire of WKCD's performing arts venues is artistically driven to foster the cultural industry in encouraging creation and developing cultural appreciation with increased performing opportunities and the building of bigger audiences. Priority is given to artistic hirers with preferential rates.

16. WKCD's performing arts venues show support to small and medium performing companies with a lower base rate and sharing of financial risk with box office sharing.

XIQU CENTRE

Venue Overview

17. The Xiqu Centre is a world-class performing arts venue in WKCD dedicated to the conservation, promotion and development of Cantonese opera and other genres of xiqu (Chinese traditional theatre). A stage dedication by the Chinese Artists

Association of Hong Kong was staged on 30 December 2018 to mark the formal start of performances in the Grand Theatre, followed by the Pre-Opening Gala from 30 December 2018 to 6 January 2019 kicking off a new wave of xiqu. The Grand Opening of the Xiqu Centre was held on 20 January 2019.

18. The Xiqu Centre houses a Grand Theatre with a maximum capacity of 1 075 seats (including 18 seats for wheelchair users) and a Tea House Theatre with a maximum of 200 seats (including five wheelchair seats). It also has a seminar hall and eight professional studios for different types of xiqu-related functions and other activities. With the unique design of the Grand Theatre being located at the top of the building, a spacious open Atrium is created for Chinese music performances, exhibitions and various kind of arts and cultural activities for the public to enjoy and participate.

Venue Utilisation

19. At the Xiqu Centre, xiqu groups enjoys scheduling priority and a preferential rate is offered to support the xiqu industry in this dedicated venue.

20. The Opening Season of the Xiqu Centre, from January to March 2019, was a great success with more than 50 000 guests attending different performances, workshops, and guided tours in the Xiqu Centre.

21. The utilisation rate of the Xiqu Centre after the three-month Opening Season is encouraging. The Grand Theatre was available for hire from May 2019 with a utilisation rate¹ of 84% from May 2019 to the end of March 2020, 24% of which are WKCDA production / presentations and 76% are hirer programmes. With the mission to promote and develop the art of xiqu, the initial calendar year of 2019 is dedicated to xiqu art form performances. In the same period, 92% of the performances or bookings are related to xiqu, while 6% are related to multi-arts and 2% to theatre.

¹ The utilisation rate of the Grand Theatre at the Xiqu Centre covers all confirmed bookings that contract agreements have been signed and paid by venue hirers.

22. The Tea House Theatre has also been available for hire since May 2019 with a utilisation rate of 72% from May 2019 to the end of March 2020, of which 96% are WKCDA production / presentations and 4% are hirer programmes. Similar to the Grand Theatre, the initial calendar year of 2019 is also dedicated to xiqu art form performances. In the same period, 98% of the performances or bookings are related to xiqu and the remaining 2% are music performances.

Retail, Food and Beverage Offerings

23. Retail, Dining and Entertainment (RDE) in the Xiqu Centre has been coming into operation progressively since January 2019. By the end of December 2019, seven food and beverage outlets have opened for business, offering a variety of food and refreshments to customers. They include a restaurant serving Cantonese cuisine, a Taiwanese bubble tea operator, a modern *cha chaan teng*-style restaurant with a menu inspired by Chinese and Western cuisines and featuring classic Hong Kong styles dishes, and a restaurant operated by local celebrity chefs serving roasted goose and delicious soup. In addition, there is also a handmade Chinese cakes and sweets shop, a tea master shop selling tea leaves and related products, and a xiqu-themed souvenir shop, allowing audiences and visitors alike to enjoy a delightful one-stop RDE experience at the Xiqu Centre.

FREESPACE

Venue Overview

24. Situated in the heart of the Art Park, Freespace is Hong Kong's new centre for contemporary performances. It is a creative facility with both indoor and outdoor performing venues where artists and audiences can engage, exchange ideas and explore the endless possibilities of performing arts with no boundaries.

25. Freespace houses The Box, one of the largest black box theatres in Hong Kong with a flexible space for cutting-edge performance. It has an audience capacity of up to 450 seated or 900

standing for a variety of theatre, dance, music, multi-media and aerial performances such as flying trapeze. On the first floor, The Room and The Studio are two multi-purpose spaces designed for rehearsals and workshops on artistic collaborations. At the main entrance of Freespace stands a bar-café Lau Bak Livehouse staging live music. Freespace is adjacent to the Great Lawn and other outdoor performance spaces in the Art Park.

Venue Utilisation

26. Freespace has invited local and international performers and local companies and WKCD self-produced performances covering different genres including dance, theatre, music, multi-media and cross-genre art forms.

27. The Box was open for hire in June 2019 with a utilisation rate² of 75% from June 2019 to the end of March 2020, among these programmes 80% of which are WKCD presentations and 20% are hirer programmes. In the same period, 52% of the programmes or bookings are related to theatre, while 18% are related to dance, 16% to music, 13% to multi-arts and 1% to non-performing arts.

Food and Beverage Offerings

28. At Freespace, Lau Bak Livehouse is a bar cum performance space presenting live music from Hong Kong and around the world. With the food and drink supplied by a local brewery, a great selection of craft beer, signature cocktails and delicious meals and snacks are available. It has an audience capacity of 100 seated or 150 standing and WKCD has programmed regular live music performances from a wide range of genres, including jazz, indie, classical and more. The Lau Bak Livehouse is a vibrant centre for intimate live music experiences and an ideal place for visit by music-lovers.

² The utilisation rate of The Box at Freespace covers all confirmed bookings that contract agreements have been signed and paid by venue hirers.

ART PARK

Venue Overview

29. The Art Park is an integral part of the 23-hectare public open space of WKCD and the green heart of WKCD featuring a rich variety of trees and green planting with spacious open lawns (the Great Lawn and the Harbourside Lawn) for leisure and relaxation.

30. As of the end of December 2019, more than 2 000 trees of over 100 species have been planted in the Art Park. It is also a vibrant venue for a variety of outdoor events and performances and art exhibitions were staged at the M+ Pavilion in the run-up to the opening of M+. The waterfront promenade and the Viewing Terrace, where cafes and restaurants are located, offer spectacular views over Victoria Harbour and it has become a popular place for gorgeous sunset photographs.

Outdoor Events

31. Set against the backdrop of Hong Kong's iconic city skyline and harbour, as well as the open green spaces, WKCD provides an unparalleled outdoor environment for hosting events.

32. In 2019, 15 events were held in the Art Park with six of them organised by WKCDA including the inaugural *Freespace Jazz Fest* and *Freespace Happening*. Three of them were jointly held by WKCDA and the District Councils as part of the Authority's ongoing effort to engage the local community, and 12 were held by external hirers. These events, covering a variety of themes ranging from sport, arts and culture, music to community activities, have attracted a total of more than 53 000 participants.

Visitor Services

33. The Art Park is designed to be welcoming and accessible for all and the Authority has been looking at different ways to activate the Art Park. Since April 2014, the Authority has been promoting SmartBike as a sustainable means of getting around the Nursery Park and Art Park. The bike sharing programme is a collaboration between WKCDA and the Tung Wah Group of Hospitals with the provision of 50 adult and children bikes for rent.

34. Regular park tours of the Nursery Park were introduced in 2015. These have been extended to the Art Park to encourage the public to discover and appreciate nature. It is a free service held twice a month in average which can be accessed through online registration with an interactive handicraft workshop included for participants to gain insight into the Park and the flora and fauna therein. In 2019, 26 park tours where participants were able to get a closer look at the trees and plants and learn interesting facts and stories about the tree species.

35. In November 2019, the Art Park Information Booth was introduced. Manned by the Park Ambassadors and volunteers, the Art Park Information Booth allows WKCDA to proactively promote the various offerings and activities in the Art Park to visitors. These are as diverse as having a picnic at the beautiful lawns, chilling out at one of the harbourside cafes and restaurants, immersing in the shows and exhibitions at M+ Pavilion and Freespace, joining park tours or riding a SmartBike. Visitors can also borrow sun loungers for free at the Information Booth.

36. The Art Park is served by a 24-hour public car park (Zone E Car Park) on Museum Drive with more than 200 parking spaces, including four dedicated disabled parking spaces, and 17 motorcycle spaces. There are also 17 electric vehicle charging stations at the B2 level.

Landscape Design and Maintenance

37. The Art Park has a green coverage of 63%, with structural and ornamental planting advocating seasonal beauty, stimulation of the senses, microclimate enhancement and, most of all, leisure enjoyment. The landscaped grounds contain different lawn areas and a rich variety of trees and plants, including native woodland species, some of which display attractive colours in different seasons; waterfront species which are salt tolerant and urban forest species which are sun tolerant to provide shade while allowing sufficient space for pedestrian circulation and other activities.

Food and Beverage Offerings

38. RDE in the Art Park began operation in June 2019. Set alongside the scenic waterfront, the harbour-side cafes and restaurants offer the perfect place to relax. As of the end of 2019, four bars/cafés and restaurants have opened their doors to the public. They include a restaurant which is a cafe by day and a bar by night serving original coffee flavours, alcoholic beverages, snacks and customised pairing services to every taste, and a pet-friendly cafe serving specialty coffee, delicious snacks, and doggie treats. Visitors can also try a mix of southern French and Italian cuisine with signature wood-fired pizzas and fresh pastas. The latest restaurant, opened in December 2019, offers an innovative dining and cultural lifestyle experience by bringing contemporary Chinese fusion cuisine, art and music together in one destination.

39. Two more food and beverage outlets, including a Japanese style café at the Park Promenade and a seafood Asian Cuisine restaurant will open soon at the Double Deck to provide visitors with a complete food and beverage experience in one of the most iconic scenic spots in Hong Kong.

THE SHOW MUST GO ON

40. In the second half of 2019, public events have had an impact on WKCD's programmes. The Authority's handling approach can best be summed up by the old phrase 'The show must go on'. WKCD has been working hard over the past few months to make WKCD venues available as far as possible and allow all programmes to take place as scheduled. Where this has not been possible due to circumstances beyond the Authority's control, particularly when there may be major disruption to traffic and transport affecting the performers, audiences and staff members, the Authority has announced changes to scheduled performances and events in advance through the WKCD website, the local media and, where possible, direct to ticket holders through emails or phone calls.

41. From September to the end of November 2019, 56 cultural or arts programmes presented by WKCD or venue hirers have been rescheduled or cancelled. Details of refund arrangements

and information on rescheduled shows were published on the WKCD website to ensure ticket holders were informed of any changes and given information on assistance that is required.

ADVICE SOUGHT

42. Members are invited to note the updates of WKCD venue operation.

West Kowloon Cultural District Authority
January 2020

Key examples of access provision at WKCD

- i. All public facilities are fully accessible for wheelchair users via access ramps or accessible lifts.
- ii. Accessible toilets are available on all floors and are fitted with automatic doors and audio indicators.
- iii. Assistive listening devices with neckloops / headphones and audio description devices are available in the Theatres and the seminar hall.
- iv. An induction loop system and personal digital amplifiers are available at information and ticketing counters.
- v. Wheelchair accessible seats and companion seats are available in all venues.
- vi. For easy access and additional space, a number of aisle seats with movable armrests are available in the Grand Theatre and the seminar hall at the Xiqu Centre.
- vii. Portable service bells are available and can be borrowed at the information desk to enable audience members to call for assistance inside the auditorium.
- viii. Technology research is underway on indoor navigation for people with visual impairments in collaboration with local groups serving people with visual impairments.
- ix. Gender neutral toilets and an adult changing place have been incorporated into the design of the Lyric Theatre Complex (LTC) and the Hong Kong Palace Museum. An audio description room and quiet room will also be introduced at LTC.

Examples of access services and initiatives at WKCD

- i. Accessible group tours are available at the Xiqu Centre. A group of people with visual impairments of different ages were invited to participate in the design process of the Xiqu Centre's touch tools for access tours. Comments were collected for continued improvement.
- ii. Guide dogs and guide dogs in training are welcome at all venues.
- iii. The Accessibility Office engaged a Deaf interpreter to work on the translation of marketing materials into Hong Kong Sign language to engage the Deaf community
- iv. On-request access services (Hong Kong Sign language interpretation and Cantonese audio description) are available for all learning programmes.
- v. Scheduled access services and booth for promotion of inclusion in selected programmes such as *Freespace Happening*, in partnership with Arts with the Disabled Association Hong Kong.