

HONG KONG ARTS ADMINISTRATORS' ASSOCIATION RESPONSE TO CULTURAL AND HERITAGE COMMISSION'S CONSULTATIVE PAPER

INTRODUCTION

The Hong Kong Arts Administrators' Association welcomes the fact that the first major public act of the Cultural and Heritage Commission (CHC) has been to engage the arts community and the general public in a consultative exercise.

ROLE OF CHC

However, the CHC document omits more than it embraces in terms of policy, structure and vision. It has not touched upon the facilitative framework that the Government should be establishing in order for the arts and culture to flourish in Hong Kong. At present, there are various agencies, some 100% governmental, some semi-government, some 100% government funded, some partially government funded, etc. How should the overall network be arranged? Would the CHC be the centre of the universe of arts and culture?

The most important question that needs to be asked and answered is: what is the role of the CHC? The consultation paper suggests that the CHC's primary focus is on Government-funded arts, excluding from its remit the well-being of private sector arts and cultural activities. The CHC should focus its influence on Government policy to bring about a transition from Government to private sector provision of arts and culture.

The CHC also has a role to play as coordinator between the arts and education sectors. For example, on the education side there is the \$5 billion Quality Education Fund, monitored and controlled by professional educators. The CHC should encourage artists to tap into that resource rather than applying for grants from the ADC's very limited budget for projects that specifically relate to arts education and arts in education.

ROLE OF GOVERNMENT vs. THE PRIVATE SECTOR

Government should move from being a provider of culture to a facilitator of culture to make room in for the private sector to operate. In the past there seems to have been a reluctance on the part of Government to make this change as the role of facilitator is more complex than that of provider. However, there are encouraging signs that this attitude is slowly changing, with the privatisation or corporatisation of Government performing companies and venues.

Subsidised ticket prices offered to people that can afford to pay more make it very difficult for commercial producers and entrepreneurs to operate in Hong Kong. Subsidised ticket prices should be phased out gradually over a period of several years.

Not only are low ticket prices giving the private sector difficulty, but the rentals charged to the private sector by Government venues (20% of gross receipts) make it harder for entrepreneurs to compete against the low ticket prices of Government-subsidised cultural presentations which do not have to recover venue hire charges in the ticket price. While Government may be charging differential rentals because it doesn't want to be seen as subsidising the private sector, the preponderance of Government-presented and Government-subsidised cultural presentations leaves little room for alternatives.

The Government has previously focussed on the supply side of arts rather than creating demand for culture. The almost total absence of arts in school curricula has made it difficult to develop new audiences.

The usage policy of Government performing venues should be reviewed. School speech days, public meetings etc, that don't require sophisticated technical facilities should be held in district halls (new ones to be provided where necessary) and leave the performance venues for the professional performing companies.

In creating a favourable environment for cultural industries to flourish, the Government should re-direct its resources to areas that would not be picked up by the private sector, such as free performances for schools. This would help to develop the "food chain" to ensure the future viability of creative industries. To stimulate private sector involvement in provision of cultural events, Government would buy tickets at full price from the private sector and pass them on at no cost to schools in order to build the audiences of the future.

Care should be taken in corporatisation of cultural activities previously offered by Government to ensure that the quality of service is not reduced. Experienced arts administrators in the civil service should be encouraged to move to the private sector.

COMMUNITY NEEDS

The CHC paper talks about placing the needs of the community as its first priority. This is laudable and is a question that should have been asked long ago before embarking on the provision of expensive (and in some cases inappropriate) cultural hardware with barely a thought given to creating the artistic software to occupy such facilities, or developing audiences to enjoy them.

The cultural needs of the community should definitely be established before going any further with the West Kowloon or Kai Tak developments.

ARTS ADMINISTRATION AND TECHNICAL ARTISTS

In the world of arts and culture, the co-inhabitants are the Government, the Artists and the People, with Arts Administrators and Technical Artists serving as inter-links between them. However, the paper makes no mention whatsoever of Arts Administration or Technical Arts. This is a grave oversight.

Competent arts administration is the cornerstone of arts development. Creative artists need arts administrators to manage, co-ordinate and market their artistic output. The extent to which such art reaches its target audience is largely dependent on the quality of arts administration applied, and the cost-effective use of public money in subsidised arts requires skilful and experienced management of resources. While creative artists are not generally known for their business acumen, arts administrators apply such skills daily in support of the artists' creative endeavours.

Technical Artists, long considered as minor supporting roles, are nowadays inseparable from successful artistic productions. Commercially sustainable art forms such as stage musicals, themed environments, popular music and motion pictures rely heavily on technical effects and support for their audience appeal. Without computerised stage machinery, mood-creating lighting effects, convincing props and sophisticated sound reinforcement, a stage musical could become a very dull experience.

Even classical art forms such as grand opera would be considerably diminished in audience appeal without their opulent sets, costumes and lighting to facilitate the suspension of disbelief. All of these elements are designed and created by technical artists, and co-ordinating them requires trained production managers and stage managers.

WEST KOWLOON ARTS PRECINCT

It is unfortunate that the Cultural and Heritage Commission has come out in favour of the Government's proposal to create an arts and entertainment district in West Kowloon.

A close examination of the Government's plans for West Kowloon reveals a paucity of vision. Firstly, leaving the creation of this cultural precinct in the hands of a single property developer is asking for trouble. Developers are naturally inclined towards maximising their return on investment and will avoid low-income cultural usage as far as possible.

Secondly, the proposed site is by no means the best available location, requiring more than a leap of faith to imagine sunny boulevards, pavement artists and sidewalk cafes operating under the plume of exhaust fumes emanating from the area's most dominant architectural feature - the exhaust chimney of the Western vehicular tunnel.

The busy freeway system that dominates the West Kowloon hinterland precludes any future organic growth of the arts district beyond its designated boundaries. Behind the narrow arts allotment is a concrete jungle fragmented by feeder roads and flyovers - a far cry from Montmartre or the Rive Gauche in Paris. It is a sad fact that Hong Kong's town planning is carried out by the Transport Department – nowhere is this more obvious than in West Kowloon.

Once the Government has made the transition from being a provider to a facilitator of culture, the creative industries that replace Government's involvement in arts provision will need an area much bigger than the West Kowloon waterfront in which to operate.

It would appear that the Government has previously assigned cultural facilities geographically as one would distribute post-offices, e.g. one per every 100,000 of population. However, the two most successful and vibrant theatre capitals of the world, London and New York, do not have their main performing venues evenly distributed around the metropolitan area.

Instead, what these two cities have in common is a critical mass of venues in one place (e.g. 65 theatres in the West End) and even more importantly, in both cases the West End and Broadway are located downtown right next to the centres of commerce. Each district also has a stimulating mixture of private galleries, art bookshops, music stores, cafes, bars and restaurants. What makes these businesses commercially viable is that they complement the cultural facilities and each other, while enjoying a large volume of passing trade from the central business district. Regrettably, the Government's plans for West Kowloon perpetuate the post-office model and serve to dilute further any sense of excitement (and economic viability) that might otherwise be generated in a vibrant arts precinct with room to grow organically.

On the other hand, the Tamar site is a far better starting point for a "new" arts district - it provides the missing link to connect the 17 performance venues that already exist between City Hall and the Convention Centre. Moreover, there are seven 5 star hotels within walking distance of the Tamar site, making it a natural hub for cultural tourism.

It is interesting to note that the Government is now re-thinking its plan to locate the central Government offices at Tamar - if the West Kowloon plan were also re-evaluated, a straight swap in functions between the two areas would kill two birds with one stone.

The arts and entertainment elements of the West Kowloon plan would be more beneficially located at Tamar, linking into the proposed Central-Wanchai waterfront entertainment area, and connecting with the existing entertainment hub that stretches between Central and Wanchai. The central Government offices could be located in a variety of alternative locations, including West Kowloon.

An arts and culture district already exists in Tsim Sha Tsui South and East, with the Hong Kong Cultural Centre, Hong Kong Museum of Art, Hong Kong Space Museum, Hong Kong Science Museum, the Hong Kong Museum of History and possibly a new arts/cultural facility at the Ex-Marine Police Headquarters. Given innovative re-packaging of the facilities, including a re-definition of the role and usage policy of the Hong Kong Cultural Centre, the attraction and significance of the district will be much enhanced. Together with its counterpart on the other side of the harbour as proposed above, this will constitute a mega- arts and culture district with convenient inter-links such as MTR and ferry.

In projecting the future of West Kowloon it is worth remembering that successful arts districts can't be manufactured overnight – they evolve over decades and centuries. It is also worth bearing in mind that London's West End and New York's Broadway were created by private entrepreneurs, not by Governments.

LIBRARIES

The CHC seems to be obsessed with what is going on in Singapore, although that over-governed city-state is hardly a great centre of arts and culture, and what is currently being done or planned there is not likely to deliver the promise of greatness in the foreseeable future.

The notions of "information", "life-long learning", "continuing education", etc. have regrettably been stripped to the bare bones of utilitarianism in the context of Hong Kong as well as in Singapore. It would be a disaster if all of our public libraries operated primarily to suit the needs of people wanting to acquire new skills or knowledge merely to meet the demands of their work or to find better jobs.

Public libraries should rather focus on how to promote a good reading habits among the public, including reading for leisure and enjoyment, without considering material returns.

To use the terminology in the "Strategies" section of the CHC paper, it is "spiritual pursuit" that is important and makes people "cultural", not their quest for "knowledge". In its policy on libraries, the CHC seems to be acting against its self-defined concept of culture.

HONG KONG AS "ASIA'S WORLD CITY"

The HKSAR Chief Executive has announced policies to stimulate high-tech investment in order to develop Hong Kong as an international city, but it will take more than technology and a change of logo to make this dream come true. Arts and culture are also needed to create a balanced society. Hong Kong also aspires to be the events capital of Asia, yet other established event capitals around the world, such as New York, have real cultural "clout" to back up their claim to the title arising from the quality and extent of year-round cultural activity.

To play its part in leading Hong Kong towards this future, the CHC will need greater depth and clarity in its thinking and recommendations.