

The "Nothingness" of the Still Imagined Land of WKCD

Terry Sun

“A Central Park for Hong Kong that is, like the one in New York.” as architect Colin Ward from Foster + Partners describes in a recent interview by Ming Pao of what his new vision and plan for the West Kowloon Cultural District (WKCD), located near to the precious waterfront of Victoria harbour. Instead of building the world’s single largest and the most expensive canopy that was once proposed, selected, and eventually rejected some nine years ago, the company has returned and shifted its plan to develop a large urban park on the 40-hectare land in which it might be a possible resolution that could put the controversial project to an end. Ward stresses that the district will not become a so-called “Cultural Fortress” which limits cultural activities within the boundary of the district, and excludes neighbouring communities. According to Ward, the land will be transformed into a public park full of green plantation, mixed with clusters of facilities for arts and culture use. The WKCD will still be an art and cultural hub promoting “seamless integration” with the old district around the area.¹ Headed by Chief Secretary for Administration, Henry Tang, the controversial WKCD project has recently come to a new stage of public consultation again, and hopefully a clearer picture will emerge early next year.

High investment budget and unjust emphasis on commercial interests while lacking long-term cultural policy stir up enormous controversies against the HKSAR government. During the on-going process of consultation and open discussion over the last decade, numerous proposals from various social sectors have been put up for examination and debates, and yet no mutual agreement and conscience have been reached. Experts from all over the world are once invited to forums and consultative meetings, supposedly giving us their perspectives and insights to the making of WKCD. Local pressure groups such as The Professional Commons and many other concerned civil groups make their attempts to voice out their worries and suggestions through different medium. They concern about how oddly such a huge public property is being shared by the private land developers rather than by local citizens, as in the case that only single developer was invited to participate in the first place.

¹ 明報，〈天幕設計師：林蔭步行為本 設施不限商場內 西九倡變港版中央公園〉，2009年9月12日。

From the report titled “A West Kowloon for the People”, the ProCommons suggests that the government should adopt a “people orientated” approach, focusing on the key concerns and interests of the citizens rather than just another land site for private consumption.²

On the other hand, art community also expresses their discontents with government’s intentions to merely focus on private interests and ambiguous positioning of the district. They worry that the poor execution and wrong pofocus of the land project will further ruin the already filmsy art atmosphere in the city. From an open letter by Dr. Kwok Ho-Mun, president of Wan Fung Art Gallery, he proposed that WKCD should be geared toward the development of Asian Art Center focusing on authentic Chinese arts and local arts. He argues that the positioning of the district should particularly be on the essence of contemporary Chinese arts starting from early 20th century.³

The heavy load of opposition all around crippled the progress of the project as much as the authority of the government. The government are lost in the self-indulged myth of imagination of a world city. As stated by Sociologist Agnes Ku in her study over the project, in the era of Chris Patten, the proposals for the WKCD was actually first started not by the needs from the society, but from certain external forces in which some foreign performing groups were frustrated by the fact that a metropolitan city like Hong Kong has no large world-standard theatrical facilities available for shows like *Les Miserables*. Ku points out that such a peculiar root was a “direct response by the government to the demand for cultural globalization from some outside forces” (Ku & Siu 335). The keen interest in shaping us to a global city sacrifices the cultural needs in local level. The positioning and direction of the development is still ambiguous to most people. The land remains untouched. No one seems to know when exactly we would have a feasible and agreeable plan and when the cultural district will come into being, and what kind of cultural structure it will be.

Some people argue that the extent of controversy drags the momentum of the development, and further jeopardises the already weakened authority of the government. They are worried that the project will end up being suffocated once and for all. Governmentality in context of the entire execution of the grand project seems to be unwillingly tested and challenged. Since it was announced in 2001, the prestige WKCD project has given a strong impression on how the government prioritises the interest of land developers rather than what its citizens demand for. The government chose the single-developer approach, allowing over

² The Profession Commons: <http://www.procommons.org.hk/?p=164>, access on 17 Dec 2009.

³ Wan Fun Art Gallery open letter dated 18 Aug 2009.

manipulation of public property by private tycoons, and thus received severe criticism from many social sector groups. The district is expected to be a landmark for tourists to glaze upon, much more than a real social resource that would benefit most aspects of life in the city. The involvement of private firms and effort to create an art space out of nothing reflect the unbalanced social justice and the lopsided mentality of the government towards the socially and financially wealthy groups in society, instead of the unprivileged. From perspective of a civilised society, public land like the cultural district itself belongs to the general public of the entire city. The ideology of leisure and pleasure as a result of urban revolution, described by French urban theorist Henri Lefebvre, characterises the completion of urbanisation of society as well as the misleading high-art designation of the WKCD.

The leisure quality in our post-industrial society fabricates our desire to create monumental landmark and cultural space from nothingness. The logic of Capitalism drives the highly commercialised society to further marginalise the poor or the under-privileged who might not even have the “leisure” to indulge into arts or another grand architectural icon. Partial right of governance of such valuable cultural development is yielded to those profit-driven land developers which are more intrigued by the commercial value of the area. Some large percentage of the land was allocated to development of residential estates instead of public space shared by local citizens. Social resources are being manipulated to benefit the land developers. Heavy criticism thus resulted as it also becomes one of the most talked topics in town. The resistance the government encounters dominates the social discourse over the yet ambiguous issue. Commercial as well as public sectors successfully turn themselves into the governing instead of the governed. Discourses over the issue make the government embarrassing as people think the project has become so much as a mere estate project. The tension between public sector and government intensified. The government has not been able to successfully channel the anger and frustration generated by the prolonged and misled project, seemingly losing his grip to direct the public opinion. However, controversies and arguments usually play positive and constructive role on reforming a society. Ironically, due to the endless discussion and criticism, public participation are strengthened by the process which people are much more concerned with their own city so much as the development of arts in Hong Kong. Never than ever issue about arts was centre of attention and heart of civil discussion. Increasing participation and intellectual confrontation of general public catalyses certain extent of social reforms. In his “So Is It Important to think”, Foucault once stated that a reform “ is never anything but the outcome

of a process in which there is conflicts, confrontation, struggle, resistance...” Some previously unknown or hidden facts have been gradually uncovered. As Foucault further describes social critique is “a matter of making conflicts more visible, of making them more essential than mere clashes of interests or mere institutional blockages....a new relation of forces must emerge whose temporary profile will be a reform” (Foucault 456-457). The controversies help the society to face the possible crisis and make responses accordingly. It is crucial to respond to the presence of crisis and to learn how to deal with it.

Some critics attribute the dilemma of the project to the withdrawal from public affairs by the government. According to social critic Mr Albert Lai, the government was badly influenced by the ideology of the much debated Washington Consensus which promotes privatisation, globalism, aiming to expand free trades and constraints upon developing countries’ public policy. Lai argues that the local government followed suit and adopted the neoliberal mentality to exercise fiscal discipline, hence diminishing its participation in on public affairs.⁴ It is peculiar that land developers somewhat take the role of building Hong Kong. The land developers would only be interested in developing residences that are profitable. Only specific target social groups are selected to enjoy the facilities instead of general public. Elements of Arts become somewhat a decoration to the new residents. By no means, WKCD is a product of Globalism, meant to satisfying the “Others” — the tourists and business visitors.

In order to level with other cosmopolitan like London, the government creates this mega urban project hoping to continue its glamorous past during colonial period. Nonetheless, the government is not willing to take the political and social responsibility to invest and nurture arts and culture from the very down bottom — reforming outdated cultural policy and art education in Hong Kong. Although we have a good number of talented artists and creative students here in the city, we do really have a good historical heritage of arts. Chinese arts are even less attended. The project is simply congenitally defeated for Hong Kong people as it is designed not for the true benefits of the public. The imagined cultural district is simply built upon nothingness of social contents. Art and cultural appreciation have yet to appear in our society. Outdated and shallow cultural policy inherited from colonial time continues to damage our quest for a more artistically civilised metropolis. Sociologist Agnes Ku called it a “hands-off approach” to culture. Inadequate art education or support does not seem to

⁴ The Professional Commons: <http://www.procommons.org.hk/?p=164>, access on 17 Dec 2009.

parallel with the rootless construction of the art facilities like the extra museums and theatres. It is more the rigid governmental regulations that trouble the existence of local artists. Also, cultural substance for the district is not being nurtured within our social system. Human factor in the project is ignored. Art appreciation in both eastern and western arts alike has not been seriously put into educational practice. Arts and culture simply could not be planned. They evolve slowly and gradually from natural causes, the lives of people. Unfortunately, the high officials see WKCD is a place for what they understand high arts in which they are controlled by elitism. More museums and theatres would not help making Hong Kong a culturally literate city. Art district cannot simply be created. Arts cannot be capitalised as such. Most art districts are formed in natural and organic ways, usually starting from a small scaled unit. However, the process of colonial ruling encouraged locals to focus their attention to economic cultivation rather than art development. Capitalist mentality and attitude are always paramount during colonial time and continues after 97. The government is still much more concerned about how to sustain economic growth and competitiveness rather than establishing culturally literate citizenship. Social support in arts development becomes pure financial support in creative industry where arts are considered a commodity. Arts are not understood as necessity in communal cohesion. Art education has long been marginalized. It is an option in the prevailing education system, instead of a must. Under Capitalism, it is not considered productive compared to business subjects. Art subjects in schools of all levels are not considered important. Students as well as parents are not quite convinced that pursuit of arts is of much significance compared to those subjects in physical and social science. Arts in all levels of education are mainly considered secondary or optional. Serious visual appreciation and studies are very rare within society. Even in post-secondary level, art education is still a very marginal subject. The government sees arts more like a business than a realm of aesthetic enjoyment. The capitalist logic that science and business are the better options if one wants to climb up on social hierarchy. People are socially trained and become so used to seeing arts as a supplement.

Until recently, innovation and creativity in particular are qualities we focus to promote. Ku rightly states that the WKCD project is by itself an example of “urban entrepreneurialism” in the global era. The cultural district is apparently more business-oriented, set to make money more than cultivating the aesthetic and cultural needs of the public. The recent controversy about the High-speed Railway incident — proposed terminus at the district proves the WKCD is merely part of the master plan of the Pan Pearl River Delta Region

programme. The trend of commodification of culture reflects the government's mentality that no long-term cultural policy is to be set. Arts and culture are planned for decoration, a continuation of colonial mentality. However, some questions should probably be addressed in advance: What do arts and culture mean to Hong Kong people? Do we really need a mammoth project like WKCD for art community (and locals) to grow or should we allocate reasonable fiscal budget to assist individual artists and art groups to nurture their arts? What kind of cultural district that could really benefit the local artists and citizens? Have the government really concerned the needs of its people? How does the government see the lack of tradition in culture and art appreciation since colonial time?

Right from its inception, the government has unjustly put the WKCD project onto an inclined position for the interests of land developers. However, the logic of cultural economy drives the government to act in dictatorial manner. A large project does not help making ourselves a world class if we do not have world class quality of citizen. A misguided large project not only will make risk of losing a huge budget of money and creating enormous social cost, but also endangers the long-term development of our very own arts and culture — source of betterment of self. Arts are not merely meant for pleasure and leisure. It could go way beyond and helps both individuals and society grow intellectually. It is more than a way of life. Arts could provide vital contributions to humanistic development of a civic society, encouraging people live fully and meaningfully. The reification of our generations is apparent in our increasingly and internationally capitalised society. Immediate and desperate actions need to be taken not just to go on with the better planned WKCD project but to strengthen art and holistic education within school system and family groups. The government must recognise the social values of arts and listen carefully to the actual cultural needs of their local inhabitants.

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