

The Cultural Masterplan

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Preamble: Public Engagement

Stage 1

How to respond to the views of the public of Hong Kong and to its government?

To summarise and incorporate the outcome of the public engagement and all its views is difficult because there are contradictions.

OMA participated actively in Public Engagement stage one, but, sensing that many issues went beyond architecture, we felt a responsibility to engage Hong Kong more directly. After moving to the city, we assembled a team of urban planners, researchers and architects – derived from Hong Kong, China, and around the world; assisted by expert cultural, financial, and political advisors – to help us further understand local conditions. During and after the public engagements, OMA and its advisors organised a series interviews and surveys with citizens from all parts of society - from people on the streets of Kowloon to government officials in Hong Kong & mainland China.

We actively sought out the views of people who we felt were essential to the viability of the District – local business people, but also the representatives of cultural & educational organisations throughout the region, and the artists, performers, and curators on whose work WKCD will depend.

The information led eventually to an understanding, which enabled us to develop a degree of informed independence. The specifics of our own educational process are perhaps too detailed for the preliminary conceptual plan; for the sake of economy, we have distilled the most significant observations into a series of ‘word clouds’ that

provided for us both clarity and inspiration.

Further insight into the process and how it informs our proposals will be provided in the second stage of the Public Engagement.

Hong Kong is a city that is on the verge of many things. The District will have a significant impact on how the city's identity will evolve.

Because of the enormity of the distance between the present and the eventual realisation of the WKCD, almost more important than the definitive shape of the new district will be the roadmap that negotiates this transition. For that reason, we offer, beyond the strict deliverables, elements of a Cultural Masterplan to launch a parallel construction effort of a creative milieu that can fully "inhabit" the District and make it come alive.

Based on interviews with stakeholders, future users, our own network of cultural, political, and financial contacts, and through an examination of best practice benchmarks of international management, we contribute these suggestions as elements of an eventual cultural roadmap that describes the steps needed before, in parallel to, and after the masterplan's physical realisation.

The Cultural Masterplan calls for:

- Redistributing the Programme
- Establishing a "Special Cultural Zone"
- Maximising M+
- Developing a Universal Theatre
- Instituting a core of Cantonese culture
- Building links to the Pearl River Delta
- Connecting to Kowloon

Redistributing the Programme

Worldwide, the call of "world class" has led to a proliferation of complexes with an almost identical footprint that may serve well as "venues" but do not, in fact, promote the development of the very arts to which they are dedicated. Instead of the generic "world class" approach, we have looked for a grouping of performance and museum spaces that does not exist anywhere else in the world and that offers, therefore, the most promising conditions for genuine interaction.

In grouping this catalogue, the Masterplan suggests that they each maintain separate identities, but that their technical, production, and rehearsal spaces are shared and, as much as possible, accessible to the public, so that the Hong Kong population can witness the – inspiring – activities of art professionals in person.

Compared to a city like London, Hong Kong's creative industry is proportionally small; or, to put it differently, Hong Kong has a large latency for the development of its creative industry. By systematically revealing the "back of house", the entire WKCD can function as an educational facility, where the public is not only invited as a passive audience, but also encouraged to explore the production aspects and become aware of the vast career possibilities of the creative sector, whose potential for employment the arrival of the District exponentially increases.

By fostering concentration and connection, the Masterplan can also create opportunities for programmatic elements that are absent from the brief, but are nevertheless essential, such as specialised production factories for both performing and visual arts, educational facilities, archives and libraries. These ideas were put into practice in both M+ and the Theatre Village in order to enrich the venues and root them in the minds of the District's visitors.

At the same time, delivering synergies between the entities enables a reduction, at least initially, to the number of performance venues as compared to what is requested in the brief. By combining the "one great theatre, two mediumsized theatres and one black box theatre" into a Universal Theatre, we create efficiency, eliminate redundancy, and provide for new possibilities for experimentation, with little deviation from the GFA indicated in the brief.

Establishing a "Special Cultural Zone"

The District now is limited programmatically to Theatre, Music, and the Arts. Its scale alone will transform the city. We therefore suggest that it be interpreted as an urban game changer that can turn a building project into a collective adventure for the city, addressing other issues than culture, or rather other issues as culture. As a first step, we propose to proclaim the District as a "Special Cultural Zone".

Like China's Special Economic Zones, this designation would imply special economic regulations, tax regimes, judicial environments – all to promote the development of new Culture.

It could also provide the ammunition for a truce between the government, the art world, and the private sector: the "SCZ" would be an arena for new partnerships, a coalition of untested

collaborations where each party might learn to relax, and even enjoy, and where new aspects of Public-Private partnership can develop. We also propose to experiment with new, more intense forms of identification between companies and their venues – to foster a sense of “ownership” that will translate in a more specific aura than the typical for-hire-venue.

In addition, the SCZ could develop a system of cultural micro fellowships and microcredits designed to unleash individual creative energies, accelerate the generation of content for District’s facilities, and enable a society not given to the introspection that is a necessity to produce serious art to take a look at itself.

Maximising M+

For something that does not yet exist, M+ has acquired an impressive mystique. The plus sign alone – who thought of it? – suggests a radical inclusiveness.

Having had the courage to avoid the Museum Franchise model, M+ has the opportunity to, for the first time in the world, implement the most creative thinking of the current moment. By embedding it in an Art Factory, we suggest moving beyond the traditional division of Display, Collection, Conservation by structurally integrating research, production, and educational dimensions into the effort.

Given Hong Kong’s history of movie-making, its existing moving image collections, its virtuosity in digital culture, and its passion for gaming, we propose to extend the range of facilities. If all these forms of moving image could be integrated, and their production facilities offered to the arts and the theatre, a situation of mutual reinforcement could emerge similar to the creative symbiosis of Los Angeles, with its effortless integration of high and low culture. By making the Art Factory an integral part of the connection between the District and West Kowloon, it becomes a symbolic, popular Gateway to Culture.

Instituting a core of Cantonese culture

If the Cantonese language is a hedge against the homogenisation of Global Culture, the increasing age of the average Cantonese opera patron is a concern. The Cultural Masterplan proposes extra

emphasis on the language – not unlike how the French have protected theirs – especially by presenting it to the younger generation through its position on the water, as part of the Middle – entertainment - Village and by encouraging specific experiments to bring Cantonese opera into the future.

Developing a Universal Theatre

Increasingly, architecture's radicalism is a question of form, or even skin. Huge, potentially ambitious projects are judged on appearance – on their looks, not on their performance or how they work.

OMA has imagined, produced, and built compelling examples of all the cultural typologies that together will form the WKCD. In all those cases the projects have had considerable impact both on the cities where they are located and on the institutions that they 'house' and often – as in the Dallas Theatre – the arts that they accommodate. As the culmination of our experiences with the theatre, we propose the creation of a Universal Theatre in which all the possible scales and types of the performing arts are collected in a single complex. As a single, interlocking unit, the Universal Theatre can accommodate performances in all disciplines – music, drama, dance, experimental theatre, street theatre, etc. – while at the same time creating opportunities to combine these forms into interactive, hybrid performances. (Yes), the classical theatre is relevant, but (no), it does not have to be predictable. In our version, it is a plane that defines, in a single fluid movement, the vestibule lobby, parterre ceiling and balcony of the auditorium. The stage is combined with offices and backstage facilities in a simple vertical element. The intersection of a serious loop for the public and the practical block for the professionals generates the stage opening. The smaller theatre is a single theatrical space – a street, sections of which can move up and down to create new configurations. The public can be in the street or in 'boxes' on either side. The "vineyard"-type concert hall is interpreted as an extension of the landscape; the smaller music hall eyes the skyline; the black box is a floating theatre, docked against the classical theatre but able to journey to alternative Hong Kong locations on its own. Shared lobbies are scattered over the deck, and open to the general public with activity day and night. All technical, logistical production, and rehearsal elements are shared and arranged on

the ground, creating an almost production village open to the public to interact with the creative processes of producing performing arts.

Building Links to the Pearl River Delta

Already in 1995, before the handover, we published a book on the global potential of the PRD. It suggested that the region would – in the foreseeable future – be one of the five most crucial megacities of the world. That moment has now clearly arrived. It also described how the cities of the Delta should each play specific roles to create a new type of loose confederation based on complementary difference rather than similarity. Hong Kong's key role in this constellation is clearly that of offering freedom of expression. The "stage" of the District offers a shared platform for the entire PRD.

The continuous improvement of HK-CN connections and the increasing freedom of movement within the PRD offer a huge "gift", a constituency of over 55 million, which is itself rapidly developing new tastes and expectations. The District needs to play a key role in their outcome by extending its microcredit generosity to the Delta, inviting artists-in-residence, and providing working spaces, exposure, and mediation.

Connecting to Kowloon

Not unlike the Centre Pompidou when it was first built in the heart of Paris, there could be no greater contrast than between current Kowloon and the intended District. The difference is total. Yet, over the past thirty years, the presence of the Pompidou in the heart of the old city has been of immense mutual benefit, because its Paris neighbourhood did not really change. In the same way, the excess vitality of Kowloon is the lifeblood of the WKCD. Without this lifeline, the District will remain anaemic, whatever its size or beauty. Particularly for the attraction of foreigners to the District, it is crucial that the current frantic atmosphere of trading is not replaced by the plastic perfection of contemporary public space. The Cultural Masterplan suggests a number of specific ensembles – for instance the imposing blocks of Ferry Point – that need to be protected, in addition to a political and economic strategy

against gentrification, essential for maintaining authenticity.

It is becoming clear that 'heritage' is not only a question of preserving masterpieces and unspoilt sections of the world, but also of recent history. We propose to apply for World Heritage status for parts of Kowloon. But at the same time, it is crucial to enliven the existing streetscape with cultural outposts of the WKCD – galleries, studios, workshops, theatre rehearsal spaces, etc. – so that Kowloon and the District will eventually merge into a single, hyper-diverse community . Before any construction takes place, events should be organized to prepare the ground. One of the District's first actions should be to instigate preservation projects in Kowloon so that early WKCD activities and programmes can be initiated cheaper and faster than the new architecture. During the District's various phases of development, a spectrum of activities could be launched that only in the final instance are accommodated in built form. To broadcast the imminent creation of the District, a series of temporary facilities – tents, floating platforms, inserts in shopping centres and at the airport – should be initiated. As people come to West Kowloon, this panoply of facilities will enable Hong Kong to come to the people and to enlist a public.

(This concept has been developed by Michael Schindhelm in collaboration with Rem Koolhaas and OMA. It has been integrated with the overall concept proposal of OMA for WKCD's master plan.)