

Development of West Kowloon Cultural District
Invitation For Proposals

Background

1. The Institute welcomes Government's decision to proceed with the development of the 40-hectare waterfront site at the West Kowloon Reclamation into an integrated arts, cultural and entertainment district. The Invitation for Proposals follows on the result of an international competition with the winning concept plan as a basis for the planning of this prime waterfront site. The Institute also considers that it makes sense to involve the private sector in implementing the project under the current public fiscal situation. However, the Institute has a number of concerns, which must be satisfactorily addressed when examining the submitted proposals and before proceeding onto the next stage of signing the provisional and project agreements.

Public Participation

2. Since the West Kowloon Cultural District development would be one of the most significant landmarks of the waterfront, the Institute urges the Government to increase transparency of the entire development process. There should be a continuing dialogue with the public, professional institutes and the arts/cultural community on the project and the Government should make decisions based on a more inclusive and transparent process.
3. At this stage, the Government needs to clarify to the public on such issues as the rationale behind changes made to the original winning scheme, the selection criteria, and the proposed implementation/development method. The public and professional institutes have not been consulted in the formulation of the current Invitation For Proposals. It is prudent for Government to engage the public to solicit their comments and supports for the project to dispel any misunderstandings and to temper opposition. Inputs from the major stakeholders and community at large would indeed be beneficial to the potential bidders in the planning and design of various facilities.
4. During the assessment stage, the credibility of the selection panel and openness of the selection process are critical to establishing the legitimacy of the selected scheme. At some point before the selection of the winning bids, the views of the public and Town Planning Board (TPB) should be gauged on the submitted proposals. We do not consider a "consultation process" based on one single selected scheme appropriate. This would be repeating the current practice to "inform instead of genuinely consult" members of the public on an Invitation For Proposals , which has already been decided, and the room for amendments is limited.

5. The Institute suggests that during the final stage of the assessment process, the short-listed proposals could be presented to the TPB and the public. Interested parties should be given opportunities to comment and show their preferences. More tangible presentations, like models or computer-simulated images, would help the public to visualize the final product and indicate their preferences. The proponents may prepare their own presentations and/or even attend the meetings to gain support for their schemes.

Development Control Mechanisms

6. The Government needs to explain how it intends to maintain planning and development control throughout the whole development time frame of the project which has a leasehold term of 50 years. Projects of this nature will span over a long period. It is not uncommon for developers to request further relaxation of the plot ratio and changes of use, particularly during the downturn of the property cycle. This, together with the great flexibility incorporated into the Invitations for Proposals, could increase the development intensity of the site to such an extent as to affect adversely the overall concept plan.
7. The Institute suggests that once the Government has selected a winning scheme, the key development parameters and/or the master development plan (showing disposition of broad uses) should be incorporated into the Outline Zoning Plan. Future changes to the scheme could then be monitored and controlled through the established statutory planning procedures to allow public scrutiny.
8. The Institute notes that the automatic people mover system is not a mandatory requirement. Easy access to the site is very important to ensure the success of the scheme. Opportunities should also be taken to link up the site with other cultural and entertainment nodes in Tsim Sha Tsui.

Implementation

9. The Institute is given to understand that a single package approach would likely result in a more integrated scheme, coordinated management and higher cost effectiveness with shared infrastructure. However, the Government should explain how they could minimize and address envisaged problems of a single package approach, e.g. how to involve the different arts groups and the public in the future operation of the cultural facilities and use of “public” spaces, possible default/bankruptcy of the project proponent etc. What is also important is for Government to explain what other implementation approaches have been examined and why they were considered not feasible. The Government’s justifications for a single package approach may also be strengthened if successful precedents, both local and international, could be promulgated.

10. Arts and cultural projects are often finished late and exceed their budget. The recently opened Walt Disney Concert Hall in Los Angeles, originally planned to commissioning in 1988, groundbreaking in 1990 with opening in 1993, has taken 16 years to complete. The budget for the 27 000 m² Concert Hall has ballooned from US\$100 million to US\$274 million with its design criticized for being too complicated and too costly. The current timetable for the development of the West Kowloon Cultural District as outlined in the Invitation For Proposals is too ambitious and adequate safeguards are required to ensure smooth implementation of the cultural facilities.
11. Apart from cultural facilities, large-scale commercial development also has a high risk. For example, the Canary Wharf is Britain's largest office project with 1.3 million m² of development on a 33-hectare site. The first phase of Canary Wharf involving 11 buildings in the London Docklands were completed on time and 1 per cent over budget in 1992. However, the developer still went into bankruptcy because a host of problems including the 1991-1995 slump in the London commercial property market; competition from the City of London, transport connections which were late and initially unreliable etc. The project was gone into administration before it was bought back again by a consortium led by the original developer in 1999, followed by a successful initial public offering of its shares. It is considered that, amongst others, a more carefully phased development and better transport connections, may have avoided the project going into administration. While the situation in Hong Kong is different from that of Britain, there are lessons to be learnt in undertaking such large-scale projects.

Future Management

12. Since the West Kowloon Cultural District is of territorial importance, public interest has to be safeguarded. The Institute suggests that a management board should be set up to oversee the Cultural District from its design/development and operation throughout the entire leasehold period. The board should comprise members who are representative of a wide range of interests, from the development sector, the arts community to individuals from both the public and private sectors.

Need for a Comprehensive Cultural Strategy

13. The building of a world class Cultural District is not just about hardware. To be successful and sustainable, Government must have a comprehensive cultural strategy to nurture the local arts community, to cultivate an interest for culture and arts amongst the public and to train up more arts administration professionals through the education system and training programmes.

Concluding Remarks

14. The Institute fully supports the development of a world class Cultural District for Hong Kong. Careful deliberations among major stakeholders are important to ensure the success of the project. This is only possible if Government adopts an open approach to allow more public participation in the selection process and in the long-term statutory planning control of the project.

15. However, there are many potential pitfalls confronting the development of projects of such a nature and magnitude as the West Kowloon Cultural District Development. How can the hardware and software for the Cultural District be better coordinated? What if there is considerable delay in completing the cultural facilities? What if the developer has difficulty in implementing the project half way through? What if the developer asks for relaxation of development restrictions in times of difficulties? At present, there are many “what if” scenarios that need to be further considered and addressed before proceeding into the next stage of development. We hope that Government would seriously consider the views of the community, which we trust are conducive to development of a new cultural facility of which Hong Kong people will be proud .

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