

Thursday, January 19, 2006

Drop the canopy

Your January 16 leader calling for a compromise between the government and the Legislative Council over the plan for the West Kowloon Cultural District warrants some critical comments.

This is a public project that will have a lasting imprint on Hong Kong for decades, and, if done correctly, into the next century. The time for planning and developing a project of this scale should not be underestimated. The Sydney Opera House took almost 20 years from conception to completion, and is still being modified to reflect the Danish architect's original plan.

The arts hub project is bigger than the opera house, and it should be developed with equal prudence. The proposed plan has been flawed from the beginning and should be reassessed, even if the project goes back to square one. The opera house plan originally called for speculative development on the site as well, but was changed after an outcry.

The assertion that there is clear public support for the current arts hub plan is flawed. In fact, the government's own survey in early October showed only inconclusive support for it. The results were misrepresented to the public, to rationalise moving the project ahead. In particular, there was no conclusive support for the giant canopy. The public, however, does want to see a cultural hub.

The hub is, in its current form, a commercial property project. Development of the site must generate \$30 billion to fund, in particular, the canopy. Some may call this creative financing of arts venues, but it is actually the government again selling out the future of Hong Kong to developers.

A simple compromise would be to remove the high-cost canopy from plans. The government originally designated the site to be a cultural park.

As a citizens' advocacy group promoting an environmentally friendly city, Hong Kong Alternatives believes that a sizeable silent majority of residents share the view that the site, featuring a cultural and entertainment district, waterfront promenade, lawns and tree-lined walkways, a children's playground and amphitheatre, is in Hong Kong's best long-term interest.

To this end, we have commissioned a reputable public-opinion agency to conduct a survey on the project, and the result will be made public very soon. We appeal to Legco and the government to develop the site into a cultural park.

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