

### **RTHK Radio 3 – ‘Viewpoint’**

One of the constant criticisms that you hear and read about is that Hong Kong is being run by middle management government officials whose view of this place is so markedly different from the reality that you and I live and know.

Be it housing, health, transportation, tourism services, economic planning or education the criticism is constant: the government seems to have a view that differs completely from what you and I think is obviously logical and rational.

In the business area that I know and work in – art and culture – it is similar.

The economic activity generated around art and culture is possibly larger than you imagine. The government itself - through its Leisure and Cultural Services Department has a budget in excess of HK\$2 billion. If you include the film & music industries, graphic & product design and production and think of the importance of television and radio, then you start to realize that art and culture is an important part of our social and economic life.

A few months ago two women walked into my art gallery and introduced themselves – one was the Assistant Director for the Singapore Tourist Board and the other her marketing assistant. They said they were in HK for a few days with the task of familiarizing themselves with Hong Kong’s visual arts scene: we spent an hour and a half talking and I was invited to participate in the next Singapore Art Fair and also given information about tax concessions and other incentives if I were to decide to re-locate my business from Hong Kong to Singapore.

What struck me about this meeting with these officials was their casual friendliness, their quite good knowledge about art and the art scenes of Singapore, Hong Kong and greater Asia and their mandate to improve Singapore’s own art and cultural scene.

Frankly, I am not used to government officials who are open and knowledgeable....the Hong Kong equivalents – if indeed if they ever actually got out of their offices and cold-called or visited any Hong Kong art galleries – have no industry knowledge of Hong Kong’s art scene nor of any of the wider issues around art and culture.

Look at this example: we have all heard about the much hyped West Kowloon reclamation project: this is the mega-dollar arts and entertainment district for which the British based Norman Foster and his design team recently won a design competition (though it must be stated not necessarily the final design) to link the Tsim Sha Tsui waterfront with the reclamation area above the Western Harbour Crossing. This is a multi-billion dollar project and no-one – either government officials nor any other of the architectural designers – have actually canvassed opinions from potential users of this project: for example, commercial art galleries.

Hong Kong's art gallery area has – over the last three years – already defined and located itself into a tight physical area: the Hollywood Road and SOHO area of Hong Kong Island. There are over 12 art galleries in the SOHO area - only two commercial galleries are located in Central and one of those is now actively planning to move.

Let me be very blunt: the West Kowloon area will not and never will be Hong Kong's art and entertainment area. The reality is already in place and it is on Hong Kong Island. Hong Kong's art galleries have already decided and it is obvious why the SOHO area has emerged as the pre-eminent arts area in Hong Kong: good transportation - including the Mid-levels Escalator, reasonable rents, close proximity to the Central Business District, Hollywood Road antique shops, Lan Kwai Fong and a middle class population that lives in reasonably sized flats.

There will soon be a shake-up within the Leisure and Cultural Services Department with the appointment of a new Head under CH Tung's new Ministerial system of accountability.....however, art and culture does not need the heavy hand of bureaucracy to thrive. Let's wish that a rational view of art and culture prevails and that these middle managers leave their offices to visit art galleries and theatres and meet artists and actors.

To sceptics of art I often ask the question "So, give me the name of a famous 17<sup>th</sup> century businessman?" They can't, but they can name famous artists, poets, musicians and writers.

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