

Hong Kong joins the culture club

INTERVIEW WITH MICHAEL LYNCH AND JERRY LIU

CEO, WEST KOWLOON CULTURAL DISTRICT AUTHORITY AND HEAD OF CREATEHK, RESPECTIVELY



MICHAEL LYNCH
Chief Executive Officer,
West Kowloon Cultural
District Authority



JERRY LIU
Head, CreateHK

Hong Kong's privileged position between China and the West is increasingly characterised by its unique cultural identity, one it is taking advantage of to establish itself as a global arts and creative hub. Already home to major festivals of film and art, it has business-friendly policies backed by a government that is throwing its not-inconsiderable financial weight behind a range of ambitious projects.

Perhaps the most visible of these is the West Kowloon Cultural District (WKCD), which over the last year has finally gained traction after years of planning and consultation, thanks in large part to the efforts of Michael Lynch.

Describing his three-year tenure as Chief Executive Officer of the West Kowloon Cultural District Authority (WKCDA) in spearheading Hong Kong's flagship cultural project, Mr Lynch uses the phrase "interesting times" on several occasions: an innocent euphemism, or a veiled reference to the fabled Chinese curse?

The idea for a world-class arts district that would symbolise Hong Kong's plans to reinvent itself as a world city with the cultural infrastructure to match London, Paris or New York dates back to the end of British rule in the late 1990s, when a 40-hectare stretch of reclaimed land jutting out from the western edge of Kowloon, across the water from Hong Kong Island, was set aside for the purpose. But for most of the first decade of the new millennium, little progress was made, as there was a call for more active public discussion and engagement in the development of a world-class art hub given its scale.

Before joining WKCDA, Mr Lynch had taken on the challenge of overhauling London's Royal Festival Hall as CEO of the South Bank Centre, a project that had also become mired in politicking for a decade. When he successfully accomplished that task, he was about to celebrate his 60th birthday and says he was pretty much ready for retirement in his native Australia (he's also a former Chief Executive of the Sydney Opera House). So why did he accept what



PMQ, the former Police Married Quarters, now a creative industries landmark with a focus on design

many saw at the time as a poisoned chalice?

“It was irresistible: they were giving me US\$2.8 billion and a huge chunk of the world’s most expensive real estate for the WKCD project,” he says ebulliently. “I had the necessary expertise, and the scale and scope of the project was utterly compelling. Yes, there were challenges around the cost and the phasing, but it was too good to turn down: I wasn’t worried about the political context, because all the projects I’ve been involved in have been political, and I knew that any project where the government has committed so much money would be difficult. What really surprised me when I took over was just how frustrated Hongkongers were about the failure to get this thing off the ground.”

The upside to the delays, he says, is that it prompted widespread debate among Hongkongers about the role of the arts in the city. “People here have looked at the big cities around the world and realised that something was missing from theirs, but the question has been how to address that. The government’s initial response was typical of Hong Kong in many ways: a project on a grand scale, part of a bigger, very ambitious vision to turn Hong Kong into a cultural hub. Perhaps it was too ambitious, but it has made people think about the role of the arts and entertainment in society.”

WKCD is nothing if not ambitious: The new cultural district aims to bring together a vibrant mix of performing and visual arts, and its CEO says the 40-hectare waterfront site will be both a showpiece for urban design and a meeting point for the local and international arts communities.

“In this cluster of venues and open space, long-term commercial, community and cultural partnerships will encourage a lively arts scene for generations to come. Based on the principle of partnership, the WKCD will be community-driven and people-oriented,” says Mr Lynch.

There are two components of the new development: the M+ Museum, and a range of performing arts facilities. Work has now begun on the US\$642 million M+ Museum, designed by Pritzker Prize-winning team Herzog & De Meuron, and focusing on 20th and 21st century art, design and architecture, and moving image from Hong Kong, China, Asia and beyond. In 2012, Swiss art collector Uli Sigg announced the donation of 1,463 pieces of works from his collection of contemporary Chinese art, valued at US\$163 million, which is planned to serve as the centrepiece of M+’s new collection when it opens in 2018. The museum also spent US\$23 million to acquire 47 other works from the Sigg Collection. The horizontal section of the 60,000 square-metre-inverted-T-shaped building will house the exhibition spaces and galleries, while the vertical bar, devoted to a research centre, a curatorial centre and retail, dining and entertainment facilities on the top floor, is to be equipped with state-of-the-art

LEDs that can showcase digital and moving images.

The performing arts venues include Xiqu (Chinese opera) Centre, Freespace (a Black Box and an Outdoor Stage), Lyric Theatre, Centre for Contemporary Performance, Medium Theatre I & II, Music Centre, Musical Theatre, and Great Theatre. There will also be rehearsal/education facilities and a number of resident company centres.

Since taking over in 2011, Lynch has worked hard to integrate the site into the local community: an exhibition was staged during the third stage of Public Engagement Exercise at the Hong Kong Heritage Discovery Centre using models, photomontages and panels to show what the future arts hub will look like. The Xiqu Centre broke ground in September 2013, while concerts and events, such as last summer’s *Mobile M+: Inflation!* exhibition of inflatable art along the waterfront, along with performances of Cantonese opera in a temporary bamboo theatre, and the annual Freespace Fest outdoor arts festival.

Looking to the future, Mr Lynch says that he and his team are determined to ensure the West Kowloon Cultural District Authority fulfills its mission to provide Hong Kong with a world-class arts and cultural district for all.

A creative grass-roots approach

The WKCD is about as high-profile a showcase for Hong Kong’s creative ambitions as could be

Hong Kong’s new Cultural District will be both a showpiece for urban design and a meeting point for the local and international arts communities

Artist’s impression of the Herzog & De Meuron-designed M+ Museum



The creative industries have been part of Hong Kong's brand since the 1970s, when Bruce Lee's Kung Fu action films captured international markets

found, but the city's government is simultaneously pursuing a range of less visible, business-oriented strategies through bodies such as Create Hong Kong (CreateHK), which was set up in 2009 to drive the development of creative industries.

CreateHK is led by Jerry Liu, who took up the job in 2010, bringing 25 years' experience in the film and television-related industries (he was a co-founder of the Media Asia Group, one of the region's largest Chinese language film producers and distributors).

"Ours is very much a behind-the-scenes role; we co-ordinate government policy, focus its resources, and work closely with stakeholders of a range of creative industries. In a nutshell, we have three policy directions: nurturing talent and new start-ups; expanding market reach overseas; and consolidating Hong Kong's position as a regional creative hub," he says.

Contrary to international perceptions that Hong Kong's economy is focused solely on finance, Mr Liu points out that the creative industries have been part of Hong Kong's brand since the 1970s, when Bruce Lee's Kung Fu action films captured international markets, and quality textile and knitwears were favoured imports in Europe and America. Not surprisingly, the main areas CreateHK works in are film and design, the latter including architecture: "all areas that have creative traditions and legacy to inspire new outputs, and all areas with huge potential in export markets, including Mainland China."

Hong Kong's biggest trade showcase in the film sector is FILMART, the second biggest film buyers' event in the world after Cannes, with over 700 exhibitors and 5,000 plus registered buyers in attendance in March 2014. "The Hong Kong film industry in particular has been revitalised by the rapid growth of the Chinese economy: until a decade ago, Mainland China still had relatively few cinemas of high-quality standard, but in recent years new, modern movie theatres have been opening up throughout the country," he explains. In response, CreateHK has been working through its Film Development Fund (FDF) to provide co-financing support for younger directors and producers to make a new generation of films to take advantage of the enlarged market for Chinese language films.

"We've had a number of very encouraging successes with FDF co-financed projects like *Echoes of Rainbow* (2010), *The Break Up Club* (2011) and *The Way We Dance* (2013). The latter was made on a shoestring with no established actors, but was one of the five top-grossing Chinese-language movies in Hong Kong last year. Consequently, it secured release in southern China; and also did well in a few Southeast Asian markets." Another modest commercial success co-financed by FDF in Mainland China from last year was *Bends*, which received strong critics support at its screening at the Cannes Film Festival's Un Certain Regard section.

CreateHK plays an equally active role in promoting Hong Kong's design industries, supporting the



Computer-enhanced aerial photo showing the eventual layout of the West Kowloon Cultural District facilities

Design Incubation Programme which was launched in 2006, since when it has recruited more than 150 companies, more than 110 of which are thriving two years after completing the incubation period. CreateHK also sponsors the Hong Kong Design Centre to organise the annual Business of Design Week (BODW), which had UK, France, Germany, Japan, Denmark and Belgium as partner country in previous years. Apart from lining up speakers from their homeland, these partner countries also brought in large trade delegations to attend the BODW with a view to exploring market opportunities in Hong Kong and Asia. “Companies from these countries set up offices in Hong Kong, using it as springboard into the Pearl River Delta, where cities like Shenzhen have established excellence in manufacturing and design as well,” says Mr Liu.

Hong Kong’s new generation of architects is also feeding into the Mainland Chinese market, he adds: “This is another example of how we are able to take advantage of the relaxation of trade barriers into mainland China. We are seeing greater room for development now. Companies, both local and international, are using Hong Kong to build here and across the border.” Such is the demand that there is now a shortage of junior-rank architects in the city, he says.

To help meet this demand, as well as in design and other creative sectors, the Education Bureau will deploy additional funding through the Study Subsidy Scheme

for Designated Professions to increase the number of places for government-subsidised university degree courses in creative disciplines, among other professions and sectors. The increase of 250 places each year in the creative disciplines will apply to architecture, fashion design, product design and digital animations.

Heritage conservation is also adding momentum to Hong Kong’s cultural and creative landscape, with a number of heritage-protection or revitalisation projects finding synergies with the burgeoning creative industries sector such as the Former Police Married Quarters on Hollywood Road (since rechristened PMQ) which has become a creative industries landmark with a focus on design, while the former Central Police Station is being renovated, and will be put to use as a centre featuring visual arts and performing arts. The former Central Market, a 1930s Bauhaus structure, will also be undergoing restoration for eventual usage as a creative outlet. Mr Liu says these sites have the potential to become mini hubs themselves, creating “organic clusters” and attracting more business and activities centred around the creative industries at Hong Kong’s vibrant central district. “When all three of these revitalised projects have been completed and given their proximity to each other and conveniently linked by Hollywood Road and the Mid-Levels escalator system, these trio of creative and cultural hubs may well be the Hong Kong Island’s answer to WKCD across the harbour.”

The former Central Market, a 1930s Bauhaus structure, will shortly be undergoing restoration for eventual usage as a creative outlet



Hong Kong’s Chief Executive, CY Leung opens Business of Design Week 2013