

**PSHA's speech at Asia House  
(8 March 2011)**

**Arts Development of Hong Kong – A time for Growth**

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Good morning, I am both delighted and honoured to be invited to speak here at this distinguished institution today. Hong Kong is not a big place, but it is a part of East Asia that has a special affinity to the United Kingdom and, despite the handover of sovereignty to China in 1997, Hong Kong has not ceased to seek inspiration from Britain in a lot of the things that we do. (In fact, I am not sure if the news has caught any attention here in Britain, but the West Kowloon Cultural District Authority of HK has just finished its selection of the conceptual development plan, and has decided to pick Norman Foster's scheme. But more about that later). HK's status today as the most open and economically advanced part of China owes much to the legacy of the early British administrators, and it is this openness and unique blend of Eastern and Western cultures that make the cultural scene in Hong Kong so unique, diverse and vibrant, and one that has tremendous potentials to expand. Riding on the back of the rapid economic development in Mainland China and before China becomes more open and sophisticated, there is now a window of opportunity for Hong Kong's cultural and creative industries to grow much faster than before, and to become a major cultural capital in that part of the world.

2. Like all leading world cities, Hong Kong values the arts and culture as an inseparable part of our lives. And like Britain, we are also keenly aware of the economic value of the cultural and creative industries and the importance of 'soft power', something which our Mainland Government is now very keen to promote. The added value of our cultural and creative industries now make up only about 4% of our GDP, so there's much room for growth. Contrary to the popular belief that Hong Kong people are only business-oriented and too materialistic in their lifestyle to pay any attention to the arts, there is indeed a burgeoning arts scene in HK. Our performing arts venues are heavily booked and we

are putting on a large number of high quality and popular exhibitions for the public.

3. The annual Hong Kong Arts Festival is now an established brand name event and a big draw to visitors from around the region; and we are now a major centre in the region for the trading and auctioning of Asian art, in particular contemporary Chinese art. The free flow of information, absolute freedom of expression and a highly educated population in HK provide the nutrients to a local culture that is very much different from that of the Mainland. The more popular strand of our local culture is particularly strong and HK made films and music still wield a lot of influence in Mainland China and South East Asian countries. In respect of traditional Chinese art forms, the Cantonese opera, for historical reasons, is now more authentic and commercially viable in HK than in any other parts of China; and the HK Chinese Orchestra is arguably the best Chinese orchestra in the whole country.

4. To take our cultural development to a higher level, we have made an investment of a total of HKD21.6 billion (£1.71 billion) into the “West Kowloon Cultural District” (WKCD). This 40-hectare WKCD development will be the largest integrated multi-arts complex that the world has ever seen, as it will house a suite of 15 new facilities, including a Concert Hall, a Great Theatre, a traditional Chinese opera centre, 4 Blackbox Theatres, a Chamber Music Hall, 4 Medium-sized Theatres of 800 seats, a Mega Performance Venue (18000 seats), plus ancillary education and entertainment facilities. M+, the flagship museum of WKCD, will focus on 20th to 21st century visual culture, and will be supported by workshop spaces for artists and an Exhibition Centre which will cater mainly for arts exhibitions and trade shows, like the annual ArtHK which is now the largest art fair in Asia. To say that this is an ambitious undertaking is a bit of an understatement. In terms of performing arts venues, WKCD will bring a 50% increase on the 28 venues Hong Kong now has.

5 By way of background and context, most of the arts you see in HK, whether visual or performing arts, is funded, operated and curated directly by the Government (rather similar to the French model). We wish to encourage more ‘arm’s length’ type of arts governance as well as more

private sector participation in the arts, and the creation of the WKCDA as a statutory but independent body is an important step in this direction. With an endowment of the land and £1.71 billion, the Authority will now build and manage the whole suite of facilities through its own retail, dining and entertainment businesses. For the past 18 months, the Government and the Authority have undertaken an extensive public consultation on three shortlisted conceptual schemes and, as I alluded to earlier, have just picked Norman Foster's scheme as the preferred option over the other two schemes by Rem Koolhaas of the Netherlands and by a renowned local architect respectively. By the way, the three schemes were exhibited to global audiences at the 12th Venice Biennale International Architecture Exhibition last summer.

6. Foster's scheme was chosen mainly for its balanced mix of land uses integrating arts and cultural facilities with other uses which will provide a pleasurable visitor experience and will enhance the vibrancy in the district. The Central Park concept, relaxing atmosphere and various green features earned the most public support during the public consultation. The scheme also puts forth innovative clustering and stacking concepts that minimize footprint and facilitate productions that straddle different art forms. Moreover, as the various facilities will come on stream over different phases by way of organic growth, the high degree of flexibility in Foster's scheme will allow swapping of sites for earlier completion of the cultural facilities and will allow public enjoyment of the arts amidst on-going construction programmes.

7. The next step is now to formulate a detailed Development Plan on the basis of Foster's conceptual scheme, seek town planning approval for it and then start tendering for the first facility before the middle of next year, and the first batch of facilities will gradually come on stream by 2015 onwards. All hands are now on deck, except that we are now in the process of recruiting a new CEO, after the former one resigned two months ago. Some of you may know Graham Sheffield, previously with the Barbican Centre, and he has just joined the British Council as its Art Director. So there's another example of the 'British legacy' in HK, if you like.

8. Our vision for WKCD is that with world-class facilities,

distinguished talents, iconic architecture and quality programmes, it will not only be a landmark in the heart of Hong Kong, a destination on its own, but a magnet to artists and audiences from around the world that will propel HK into a major cultural capital in Asia, like what London now is to Europe. Going forward, WKCD will not only be going out to invite proposals for iconic architectural designs for three of the key facilities, but will be seeking to forge strategic partnerships with performing arts organizations and key museums around the world in order to devise the optimal mode of governance for its performing arts venue and build up a respectable collection for the M+.

9. Ambitions and visions aside, you might ask: is this risky business? Many other cultural districts elsewhere have developed and evolved organically over a long period of time – what makes us believe we can leap-frog this process in Hong Kong? Will there be a big enough audience base to fill all those seats? Will there be a critical mass of art groups and performers to produce enough programmes to make these venues viable?

10. These are all very pertinent questions. But as I said earlier, we are now suffering a serious shortage of performing arts venues. As for the 15 managed by the Government, their average booking rates are consistently above 90%. This shortage poses a serious constraint on HK's development as a centre for the arts as, for instance, we have had to turn away a lot of musical shows (like the Phantom of the Opera) because such shows are long-running and we just don't have the slots for them. So, we badly need the cultural venues the WKCD is going to offer.

11. What about the audience? According to a recent market analysis, the audience base in Hong Kong will be expanding gradually so that by the time the various new cultural facilities are completed, they can be assured of positive demand in terms of patronage. It is envisaged that apart from the local pool of audience, WKCD will be able to tap into a wider audience base in the neighbouring Guangdong province which is one of the most affluent regions of Mainland China. Thanks to the convenient connection of an Express Rail Link, the terminus of which will be situated right next to WKCD, art lovers from across the border in Guangdong and beyond will be able to arrive in WKCD in some 40

minutes.

12. Building hardware is always easier than building up the software that runs it. In order to nurture our future audience base and raise the level of arts appreciation in the community, we are putting a strong focus on arts education. We have launched a new secondary school curriculum, which will expose senior secondary school students to no less than 135 hours of arts learning experience in their three-year curriculum. This will help to round out their education and prepare those with the right talent and aptitude to pursue a career in the arts in the future. In tandem, we have just allocated new funding to the Academy for Performing Arts to provide professional training from post-secondary Diploma level up to Master's Degree level.

13. There is already a major shortfall in art administrators in HK and the problem is going to get worse with the advent of WKCD, and we also need curators for our new museums and galleries. The universities in Hong Kong have now all got the message, and are providing an increasing number of art-related sub-degrees, undergraduate and post-graduate courses. This reflects the demand for these courses, and a realisation that a degree in such disciplines is able to command market value. We are gearing up the training of art administrators through various internship programmes, including the Clore leadership programme and Sage Gateshead programme here in Britain. As for the general public, we are now doing much more to bring arts to the broader community. If you visit Hong Kong, you will see a lot more art installations and live performances in our public parks and local performing venues, and many more are being planned.

14. With regard to the capacity building of professional artists and art bodies, we have increased funding for nine major performing companies, and have allocated more funds to the Arts Development Council which is a statutory body with a mission to support art development projects, small and medium sized art groups, art policy research, as well as advocacy. In addition, the Hong Kong government will shortly be introducing a new funding scheme to strengthen the capacity of medium sized art groups, hopefully helping some of them achieve commercial success and financial independence eventually. One success factor in the sophisticated

arts scene in Europe and the US is the generous contribution from the private sector. This is unfortunately lacking in Hong Kong, where only a handful of big corporations or individuals are contributing significantly to the arts, and only the more established art groups are able to attract such donations. Therefore, one element of this new funding scheme is to encourage the corporate sector to support the arts – we are thinking of matching private contributions with Government funds at a ratio higher than 1:1. If the major performing venues in the WKCD were to have their own resident companies which are home-grown, it is important to groom as many of the middle-ranking groups as possible to become ‘majors’. And as soon as possible too.

15 If you are interested in the dollar sign, all in all the Hong Kong Government is spending close to HK\$3 billion (£238 million) every year on arts and culture, representing 1% of total Government spending, excluding capital works projects. From my bureau’s point of view, the Government, with its relatively strong financial position now, could do more for the arts. Of course there is never an adequate level of funding for the arts, if you ask the arts community.

16. In conclusion, ladies and gentlemen, it is a time for growth in HK, and we are at the cusp of some exciting developments in respect of arts and culture. Hong Kong is a small place, but we are always open to new ideas and hungry for inspiration. That is in fact the reason I made this trip to London. I have already learnt a lot from the very competent and inspiring people I met yesterday and I look forward to meeting many more in the coming two days. And I certainly will not leave Asia House without a pointer or two from this distinguished audience.

Thank you.