



# CULTURE CLUB

**For a cultural center to work it's not just the buildings that matter, says ADRIAN ELLIS, it's everything in between that really counts**

**C**ultural districts – quarters with a high density of art galleries, museums, theaters and concert halls – have become the anchors of a formidable swathe of urban development projects around the world from Rio to Montreal, Helsinki to Melbourne, Hong Kong to Abu Dhabi. Many more are in the pipeline.

These “top down” exercises often get bad press in the mistaken belief that the great cities they seek to emulate such as Paris, Amsterdam, Berlin, New York and London were organic, slo-mo, naturally occurring phenomena that cannot and should not be manufactured. How *nouveau riche* to try...

This is, of course, to misunderstand – often with a daft, sniffy hauteur – how those cities took their shape and character, which was through forceful top-down planning. Haussmann, Nash and Schinkel were planners and architects of ruthless self-confidence and with an almost totalitarian mandate, expunging the past and the present with barely a thought. In contrast, cultural districts are now usually planned, even in the least consultative of political cultures, with agonized attention (rhetorical or real) to community input and vigorous genuflections to history.

But for all the deliberations, the cultural district boom still seems to have two blind spots. First, this is happening as high culture sometimes struggles for audiences as well as financial support from the box office, philanthropy and public sector. Audiences for high arts are under threat, the reasons well understood, and the business model for arts organizations challenged as a result. Whatever the sizzle, when the steak is not as appetizing as it has been, is building steak houses the best strategic bet for urban regeneration? Not unless serious effort is given to working out how the buildings' occupants can develop audiences and programs in a way that

is relevant and meaningful for the communities for whom these projects are the centerpiece.

The second challenge is that the big difference between successful and less successful cultural districts lies in whether thought has been given to the animation of the surrounding public spaces and provision for outdoor performances, smaller-scale galleries, live music in cafés and bars, craft studios and maker spaces, informal gathering spaces and educational facilities. The small stuff that feels like background is as important in making a compelling destination as the more grandiose cultural temples in the foreground. The “software” and the infill are as important for success as the iconic and photogenic hardware that grabs the headlines. And it takes careful planning and supportive economics – well beyond the architects' paygrade – to attract artists and makers, collocating production and consumption, and to ensure that street-level animation is viable.

Cities are striving to become less interchangeable, less commodified, more distinctive. Expressive and iconic architecture and bespoke must-see spectacles are handy weapons in that battle. The arts community has stepped up to the challenge with enthusiasm and



The Bode Museum in Berlin (far left) was closed for eight years while it was renovated at a cost of more than \$200 million. The Bode is one of five museums located on the fittingly named Museum Island, a UNESCO World Heritage Site, in the heart of the city

West Kowloon’s cultural district is under construction, with the first major venue set to open in 2018. Meanwhile, “bamboo theaters,” (left) traditional temporary structures which stage Cantonese opera performances, have made appearances on the site, attracting crowds and interest in the district

PHOTOGRAPHS: BERND WEINGART, STAATLICHE MUSEEN ZU BERLIN / WEST KOWLOON CULTURAL DISTRICT AUTHORITY

intelligence, and sometimes more than a little expediency. There is barely a forum you can think of – urban regeneration, health, tourism, economic development, inward investment – in which the arts community is not an active, articulate and canny participant.

The committed capital expenditure in the pipeline for investment in cultural infrastructure over the next 10 to 20 years is staggering. Planners should not fixate on buildings themselves, but make sure they are designed for truly compelling programs and that between the buildings are vibrant, attractive public spaces for the communities they aspire to serve.



### ADRIAN ELLIS

Adrian Ellis is the Director of the Global Cultural Districts Network and founder of AEA Consulting, an international practice that specializes in arts management. From 2007 to 2012 he was Executive Director of Jazz at Lincoln Center in New York.

## TALE OF TWO CITIES

Berlin is an example of a classical European cultural hub, while West Kowloon in Hong Kong is a modern story of artistic commitment and urban planning. Here, we speak to cultural ambassadors from both

*Following are excerpts of interviews that were conducted separately.*

### What is unique about your cultural center?

**MICHAEL EISSENHAUER, Director General of the Staatliche Museen zu Berlin:** Berlin itself. It has a history of ruptures, going back to the 19th century. After the Wall fell, not only did Berlin have to bring the city together, it also had to reinvent itself and catch up. And quickly. As a result of all that change, Berlin has more options than other major cities – it’s more flexible. This openness is one of the essential differences for me.

The diversity of our National Museums – more than 5 million objects in 19 buildings – presents a communications challenge, compared to the single brand of the Louvre or Met. “The National Museums in Berlin” means something different to each person.

### DUNCAN PESCOD, CEO of the West Kowloon Cultural District Authority:

What is unique is the fact that we are building the district from scratch on a magnificent site in the heart of Hong Kong. This is an opportunity not only to realize the government’s ambition to build world-class facilities for the people of Hong Kong, but also to shape the future of arts and culture in the region. The close relations we are building with China and the West mean we really can bridge East and West – there’s a dynamic relationship between Asian traditions and Western culture.

### How do state-led approaches coexist with more entrepreneurial initiatives?

**ME:** In Berlin, there is real cooperation – they cross-fertilize. Many locations means we can put on many different events. We host contemporary artists, theatrical performances, musical performances –

these external initiatives come into many of the museums and enormously enrich the cultural spectrum. For example, we had eight Kraftwerk concerts in the Neue Nationalgalerie in 2015.

**DP:** The West Kowloon Cultural District Authority has the full support of the government, while being required to operate in a prudent commercial manner. This allows for the best of both worlds. On the one hand, we listen to the broad arts community in Hong Kong who are not only part of our future audience group, but are also potential collaborators. Meanwhile, Hong Kong's commercial art scene has had great success.

**Is culture an important component in a wider political and economic strategy?**

**ME:** The culture of Berlin has roots in the whole community. During the 20th century, the Nazis, the dictatorship of East Germany and the Wall all threatened to destroy that, but enough vigor remained for the organic unity to re-emerge. This is why Berlin is able to reinvent itself. Cultural districts can thrive only if they are set up with sustainable funding, if they have functions beyond a single area, and

if they do not define themselves solely in terms of tourism. They must look beyond money-making, otherwise they don't work.

**DP:** Absolutely. Artists have an important role in society and art is a necessary ingredient to make cities liveable – good places to live, work and play. Art at its best holds a mirror up to society and challenges norms. This was clearly evident in art that emerged out of the Occupy Central movement in Hong Kong.

**How can your city project itself as both a cultural attraction and a site for creativity and experiment?**

**ME:** The two aspects complement each other. Contemporary culture reflects our heritage, informing our views on museum treasures and, in turn, gaining substance through its relationship with the past. I think there is a lot of potential for a reinvention of Berlin in this duality.

**DP:** Hong Kong is well known for the importance we place on the freedom to express, to publish and to debate. As a symbol, the extraordinary architecture of the West Kowloon district is already emerging. Our programming will feature the best of local, regional and

international artists and offer new environments for experimentation.

**What was the thinking behind your master plan?**

**ME:** Ours took shape after the fall of the Berlin Wall. After 30 to 40 years of separate development, museums in the east and west of the country were to be brought together again. While Museum Island is a UNESCO World Heritage Site, it also has to build for the future, optimizing access to the buildings and modernizing safety and efficiency. Bridges connecting the buildings were all destroyed during World War II and recreating them was impractical. Instead, underground walkways are being built, the "Archaeological Promenade."

**DP:** We are building far more than cultural facilities. Starting from scratch, on land newly reclaimed from the sea, we are building a town within the city, with cultural, artistic, educational, retail, dining, hotel, residential, office and other spaces together with the infrastructure to support that community. We hope to promote an understanding of Hong Kong's identity and traditions and create a place where people can come together.



The Neues Museum in Berlin is home to the iconic bust of Nefertiti, thought to have been made more than 3,300 years ago. The original was excavated in Egypt by a German archaeologist in 1912. The museum has several copies (left) including an idealized version from 1921 which features the eye that is missing from the original. The bust has recently been in the news since two artists claimed to have secretly scanned it and made the files available for anyone to download and make a copy with a 3-D printer. Modern scanning technology has led to many arts institutions facing similar dilemmas

PHOTOGRAPHS: ACHIM KLEUKER, STAATLICHE MUSEEN ZU BERLIN / ZHANG HUANG / WEST KOWLOON CULTURAL DISTRICT AUTHORITY

**What are the main cultural projects currently under way in your city?**

**ME:** We have almost 20 independent building projects running at the moment. It is an incredible period of change. The most prominent project is the Humboldt Forum, the reconstruction of the former Berlin City Palace where our non-European collections will be housed under one roof and highlight the connections between Europe and the rest of the world.

On Museum Island, British architect David Chipperfield is designing a new entrance building that will link all the Museum Island buildings with one another. The Pergamon Museum project is just as big – almost half a billion euros will go to its restoration. The Neue Nationalgalerie at the Kulturforum will be refurbished over the next few years and extended – everyone is watching what we are doing to it. We are also building a central repository, a city in itself, for historic objects. Plus innumerable smaller projects. A long answer, but...

**DP:** This cultural development in West Kowloon is one of the largest in the world, with many venues and performance spaces. The Xiqu Centre will

be the first major venue to open, in 2018. Xiqu is a performing art that has existed in China for more than 2,000 years and integrates literature, music, arts, dance, martial arts and juggling. The best-known genres include Kunqu, Cantonese opera and Beijing opera.

M+ is Hong Kong's new museum for 20th and 21st century art, design, architecture and the moving image, with work from Asia and beyond. The Lyric Theatre will act as a platform for Hong Kong's leading performing arts organizations and a venue for programs from Hong Kong and worldwide. One of the most important spaces will be the park, a public space and green lung at the heart of the city. There will be a black box theater for 450 people and outdoor performance space for up to 10,000.

Longer term, we will have more theater and music venues, gallery spaces and education facilities.

Interviews conducted by Maria Marques and David Lasserson of **BRUNSWICK ARTS**, an international communications consultancy dedicated to promoting and managing the reputation and interests of arts, cultural and charitable organizations around the world.  
[www.brunswickarts.com](http://www.brunswickarts.com)



**MICHAEL EISSENHAUER**

Michael Eissenhauer is the Director General of the Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, the largest network of museums in Germany, comprising 15 collections and four institutes. Previously, he was Director of the Museumslandschaft Hessen Kassel, where he oversaw the museum's restructuring and renovation.



**DUNCAN PESCOD**

Duncan Pescod is CEO of the West Kowloon Cultural District Authority. He previously served for more than 32 years across various bureaus and departments in the Hong Kong government, including transport, housing, tourism, urban services and trade.



**Detail from artist Zhang Huan's "Family Tree" series (left). This, together with work from many other Chinese and Hong Kong artists, will be housed in West Kowloon when construction on the M+ Museum is finished. The name reflects the concept of "museum and more"**

**The site upon which the West Kowloon Cultural District is being built (right) was under water 30 years ago. The government began to reclaim land from Victoria Harbour in the 1990s; new ground for a groundbreaking cultural center**

