**SCMP Article**

**West Kowloon culture hub will enrich the city**

The competition among cities to offer world-class cultural attractions grew hotter a week ago, with the opening of the Louvre Abu Dhabi Museum, delayed for five years because of the oil price slump.

It seems the Abu Dhabi side is paying around ­US$525 million for the right to use the Louvre name for 30 years. Include management, other services and loans from the collections of the Louvre and other French museums, and the cost reaches US$1 billion.

That does not include the building, designed by Jean Nouvel. It features a 180-metre wide lattice dome with 23 permanent galleries, and even has parking for luxury yachts. That cost another US$705 million or so.

But that isn’t the whole story. The Abu Dhabi Louvre is just one part of a US$18 billion, 2.4 sq km cultural district planned to house six museums.

Abu Dhabi’s ambitions make Hong Kong’s West Kowloon Cultural District look quite modest. As a member of the West Kowloon Cultural District Authority Board, I am very aware of the controversies surrounding our flagship cultural projects. We have had criticism of the costs, design and whole concept of facilities like the M+ museum of contemporary art and the Xiqu opera theatre. The criticism increased massively with the announcement that we would be hosting a branch of the Beijing Palace Museum.

As the West Kowloon complex starts to take shape, the controversy seems out of proportion. When the final costs are added up, it will obviously be far cheaper than some other international cultural projects. And we certainly do not need to pay to use the Palace Museum name or to borrow and display exhibits from the collection in the Forbidden City.

Rather than complain about past controversies, we should be more optimistic about West Kowloon.

M+, its museum for modern and contemporary visual culture, is going to be unique in Asia and indeed the whole world. The Uli Sigg collection of modern Chinese art alone will make it a must-see. There will be all sorts of international exhibits coming through, and space for local artists’ work as well.

The Hong Kong Palace Museum will represent an amazing contrast – a selection of historic Chinese treasures normally kept at the Forbidden City.

Again, there will be space for other displays. The potential here is huge: for example, some local and overseas Chinese collectors have a huge number of items the public rarely sees.

What’s more, the Xiqu centre and other performing arts venues will ensure something new is always happening at West Kowloon. All these facilities will reflect our local and Chinese heritage, and feature all sorts of international exhibitions and events.

The district will essentially form a waterfront park with plenty of greenery. People complaining about the architecture should bear in mind that there is a trade-off between the size and shape of buildings, and the amount of open space for children to play and families to have picnics in.

I am positive that Hong Kong people will love the end result. For example, the Hong Kong Palace Museum structure will reflect traditional Chinese and contemporary Hong Kong design – and do justice to its contents. With views of the harbour from inside and the surrounding areas, it will be a great place to visit.

By 2022, when the Hong Kong Palace Museum is opened along with the other facilities, West Kowloon will be a major asset to the whole community.

It will be a place your family will enjoy – and attractions and activities for children will be a vital ingredient in the success of the whole district.

Unlike Abu Dhabi, Hong Kong is not creating new cultural attractions out of necessity and concern for our future. We are not dependent on a natural resource that is running out, and we are not in a region of instability and conflict.

The West Kowloon Cultural District has a controversial history, which we can talk about all day if we want to.

But we should really see it now as a significant positive addition to life in our city. It will give the whole community new and exciting leisure and cultural options – surely that’s nothing to complain about.