

ARTS & BOOKS

Foster's Hong Kong canopy: gone with the financial whirl-wind.

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<http://www.fosterandpartners.com/>

Amidst controversy and financial uncertainties, the Hong Kong government has decided to postpone its flagship arts centre project.

In 2001, the Hong Kong government started toying with the idea of turning West Kowloon —a government-owned peninsula of reclaimed land in the heart of the harbour— into a vast cultural district. This new “Hong Kong arts center” was to be several times the size of Lincoln Center with museums, an opera house, a concert hall, theatres, a sports stadium, etc...

The project was ambitious with a construction site of almost 40 hectares and the total invested capital estimated at up to 40 billion US dollars. It captured the imagination of the greatest architects, but also of the major property developers and institutional giants such as the Georges Pompidou Centre in Paris, or the Solomon R.Guggenheim Foundation and the Museum of Modern Art in New York. All were vying to get the right to design, build and run what Thomas Krens, the director of the Guggenheim Foundation, described as « the most exciting opportunity in the world because of the scale and the location. »*

But soon the project became very controversial. Local intellectuals and artists complained that Western designers and cultural institutions were too prominent. They were particularly irritated by the government's insistence that Norman Foster should design a giant outdoor canopy to cover much of the peninsula in order to create a new symbol for the city « to compare with the Eiffel Tower in Paris or the Sydney Opera House ».** Foster's design was also strongly criticised by competitor Frank Gehry who claimed that it was rehashed from an idea of legendary designer Buckminster Fuller.

But the main problem lay with the financial plans prepared by the government. Populists complained that developers were getting too good a deal. Thus the government ruled that in exchange for permission to construct commercial, office and residential buildings, the winning developer would not only build the museums and various venues, but also cover their operating costs for the next 30 years. This involved setting up a \$3.87 billion trust fund. Real estate developers eventually refused to bid, considering the deal too unfavourable. On the 21st of February, the Hong Kong government had to announce publicly that the entire project was being postponed.

Sources: *« Hong Kong Halts Plans for Arts Center, » *The New York Times* 22 February 2006.

**« Cultural clash in Hong Kong, » *The New York Times* 6 January 2005.

«West Kowloon canopy functional, practical, » <http://news.gov.hk> 12 December 2004.

« Hong Kong arts center a battleground for world's top architects, » <http://skyscrapercity.com> 4 March 2005.