



S2:E1 Knowing your audience: lessons from West Kowloon

Kingsley Jayasekera in conversation with Adrian Ellis

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[THEME MUSIC]

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Adrian Ellis: Hello, and welcome to The Three Bells. This podcast is one of a series brought to you by AEA Consulting and The Binnacle Foundation for the Global Cultural Districts Network, in which we explore what's happening around the world on those busy and sometimes congested intersections of cultural and urban life.

The series and supporting materials can be found at www.thethreebells.net and if you like our content, please subscribe and give us a positive review on your podcast listening platform of choice.

I'm Adrian Ellis, chair of GCDN. And today I'm talking to Kingsley Jayasekera. From 2013 until late last year, Kingsley was the general manager of marketing and customer experience for the West Kowloon Cultural District in Hong Kong. And last year, he also acted as director of marketing for the recently opened M+ museum of visual culture, and successfully saw through the launch campaign for that new anchor of the West Kowloon district.

Kingsley has a remarkable overview – having spent the best part of a decade, right at the heart of the project. I followed the evolution of the district through various chapters from about 2002. So having the opportunity to talk to Kingsley about the story from the inside is a privilege, particularly as I managed to catch him on his last day in Hong Kong. Kingsley shares his thoughts on West Kowloon, its evolution and the challenges and opportunities that it presents.

And after the conversation I'm joined by Criena Gehrke for our usual discussion of key takeaways. So stay tuned.

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Adrian Ellis: Hi Kingsley.

[00:01:50]

Kingsley Jayasekera: Hi there.



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Adrian Ellis: So am I right in thinking that this is your last day in Hong Kong?

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Kingsley Jayasekera: Yeah, it's my last day. I'm leaving Hong Kong after nine years. Which is a very um, poignant moment, to be honest, it's been incredibly touching, saying goodbye to everybody and being given gifts and being fed all week. Because obviously when you in Hong Kong, it's all about food. So I'd been out for lunch and dinner every day and eaten so much. But yeah, no, I'm actually surrounded by bags because I'm initially going to the airport straight after this podcast, to be boarding, so yes.

[00:02:28]

Adrian Ellis: Wow, I am doubly thrilled and uh, and deeply grateful to you for having found time in what I, I can imagine as a both busy and stressful period. I know what packing and moving is like. So, so thank you for finding some time to talk to us.

Kingsley, you've been at West Kowloon for, as you say, nine years. Has that been consistently in the same role? And can you just briefly describe that role?

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Kingsley Jayasekera: Well, it's pretty much been the same role. Well, I came in particularly looking at marketing and digital. And then I, actually for a year and a half, I took over comms as well, which was interesting. I did communications and public affairs, which is a very, very interesting thing to do in the context of Hong Kong. Um, and then the role really shifted into the core thing I'd been doing, which is marketing and customer experience.

Customer experience being definitely an important trend that was very important for the district and very interesting. And actually for the last three months, I've just been focusing on the opening of M+ so, which is obviously an amazingly exciting project. So I've been really, really just honing in on that three months to get through the opening.

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Adrian Ellis: So before we moved to the cultural district, you came, I think from Sadler's Wells, is that right? In London.

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Kingsley Jayasekera: Yeah, I was at Sadler's Wells for many years. Which was again, an amazing place to work. I work in closely with Alistair Spalding. It was very exciting theatre because I think there at Sadler's Wells, we kind of really showed that dance didn't have to be the kind of forgotten art form or the difficult art form.

We were able to really show that there could be audiences that could be found, that it could reach a wider appeal that um, we could do challenging work. And that was a very exciting period. And then before that, my background was more working in um, partly in West End theatre, entertainment uh, rock and pop and various things like that, but also working with a lot of established companies.



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Kingsley Jayasekera: So the National Theatre, the Royal Opera House, the Barbican, so working with them from an agency point of view. So I had a lot of experience working with these, the major accounts, but not being within the organisation, which is quite an interesting way of being, and then finally when Sadler's Wells approached me cause they're one of my clients, I made that move to the client's side.

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Adrian Ellis: How interesting. And I have just figured out a Sadler's Wells West Kowloon connection, as you were speaking, that hadn't occurred to me, which is of course, Michael Lynch. So am I right in thinking that you, you joined West Kowloon when Michael was the chief executive?

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Kingsley Jayasekera: Yeah. So actually the history with me and the West Kowloon goes back quite a way. I visited Hong Kong years and years ago, you know, a typical backpacker staying in Chungking Mansions in some tiny little like hostel. Um, and then um, what happened was in 2008 I was invited by Chris Smith to do a trip to Hong Kong um, with, uh, who came Tony Hall, Muriel Barshaw and Michael Lynch and various other people.

And we were invited to come over to Hong Kong and speak about arts and culture. And we met some of the people involved that was at that point in West Kowloon and talking about where it was going. And then a few years after that Michael joined as chief executive and I'd been coming back and I'd been teaching on the core leadership here.

Um, and when I was over here, one of those times, you know, I was also interested in coming over and I knew Michael quite well because I'd worked at Sadler's Wells with his wife, Chrissy Sharp, who sadly passed away very recently uh, who was a lovely person. And I'd worked with her and I'd got to know Michael, very well, and he asked me if I'd come over. So it seemed like an opportunity to do something quite unique because the scale of the project is just monumentally huge. So that was a really good opportunity.

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Adrian Ellis: So I think probably most of our listeners are familiar broadly with West Kowloon Cultural District. But can you give us just some idea of scale, broad usage, and what stage of development it was at when you arrived nine years ago.

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Kingsley Jayasekera: Yeah, sure. I mean, this is a major project that has been talked about from a very very, you know, many years by the Hong Kong government and beyond that. So it's a significant project and there is a top-down because it is on reclaimed land. So it's a very, in many ways, a bit of a blank canvas.

So there was this area of reclaimed land on the waterfront that had been reclaimed when they were building the connections to the uh, new international airport and essentially it's 40 hectares of land. It would be actually be valued as probably the most expensive land in the world. Um, because you ride on Victoria Harbour and the project had a long planning process and really, really kicked off formerly in the, in the current stage in 2008.



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Kingsley Jayasekera: And at the time I arrived, there had been already a selection of a master plan. And they were really working on the first venue. They'd started doing their first projects on the site, which were interesting enough for a new district, very traditional. They were doing bamboo theatre shows.

So there's one, they'd build an immense bamboo theatre. And so they, then they were starting to work on the construction of the first venue, which is the Xiqu Centre. In total, at the moment we have a number of venues, the Xiqu Centre is at the east end of the district, at the Western end, the headland, we've got the Freespace. There's the arts pavilion, which is a small gallery space. There is the M+ museum that's just opened and then there's the 13 hectare public park. And then also opening next year will be the Hong Kong Palace Museum. And then the Lyric Theatre will be completed in around 24, 25. And that has three venues.

So it's, it's a substantial theatre with a resident company studio. So these are big, spaces. And then in the future, there'll be more major venues, an exhibition centre, a music centre, potentially two or three other theatres. And then the rest will be filled in with offices, retail um, some residential.

So it's a fully planned out district uh, but even at the moment, there's a substantial amount there with the opening of M+ and then with the opening of the palace museum next year.

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Adrian Ellis: So the residential uh, some residential, retail and office space – none of it is yet in place.

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Kingsley Jayasekera: There is some F&B, some dining, which exists within the park area. So there's a number of restaurants been very, very successful right on the waterfront. There are restaurants within the M+, there will be restaurants in the Hong Kong Palace Museum. There's a restaurant in the Freespace.

There's a number of restaurants in the Xiqu Centre. Uh, there's a recurring theme here, I'm sure you're getting – which is restaurants, but that is because we are in Hong Kong. And in Hong Kong, it's always about restaurants. Retail will follow on later, the residential will follow on later. The first part of the office space just opened this year, which is the west WKCDA tower where we have our offices, but also that will be, um, there'll be a opening there for retail and offices too.

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Adrian Ellis: Got it. It's always very interesting to follow the sequencing when, when cultural districts are planned like this, the order in which they are sequenced. The cultural element, which defines the area usually comes first for very obvious reasons because it acts as the magnet in due course for commercial development. But of course it also usually takes quite a long time for that commercial, residential, office development to follow. And so there's a long period, often longer than people want to admit, to get the whole mix operating in the way that it's originally envisaged.



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Adrian Ellis: And it is my experience, going way back to London Stocklands when I worked on the Design Museum, that, that period can be quite nerve wracking. Uh, when you're, you initially open and you open your cultural element and you don't have the surrounding infrastructure that will ultimately come, but for a period of time, you're sort of operating without it.

And I have not been to West Kowloon, I don't know, for four or five years, but I would imagine that's probably the case now, which is to say you've got your cultural components and your public space components that are highly significant, but that it will take time for the sort of, the street life and the daily life and the commuting life to sort of kick in.

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Kingsley Jayasekera: Yeah that's very true. I mean, inevitably, yeah, it was vital we started with the cultural elements and there were other areas that were designated for office and retail that were simply inaccessible because they were part of the land occupied by the high-speed rail link.

So we couldn't really do those, but I think that with the park being such a popular location in the centre of the city and increasingly that having always regular people coming and that being better connectivity now – because there are bus routes coming in, and also with the bridge shortly opening into the district from the nearby MTR station and shopping precinct, we are seeing a lot of daily use.

And I think that the big catalyst has really been, you know, in this year, as people have been looking to get outdoors because of COVID and also with M+, we're seeing that vibrancy coming together. But yes, you're absolutely right. Once the squares start to appear, you know, you'll start to see those public squares really become animated and that daily life going on.

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Adrian Ellis: And also, there's not a lot of green space in Hong Kong, so this must be um, a real addition to the, the texture of civics space.

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Kingsley Jayasekera: Absolutely. And that's one of the most exciting things, and it's been an interesting thing because I'll be honest, there's a certain level of cynicism about the project within the city that's gone on for a long time, and people worry about what it will be like. And I think that they're very happy when they see the park, because it, it really does deliver.

And the reason I say that is because it really is a park in the truest sense. Uh, when you live outside of Hong Kong, you're used to the concepts, you know, the park where you can sit on the grass and have a picnic, you know, or you could just kick a football or you could fly a kite, or you could ride a bike. Generally in Hong Kong, you can't do those things in parks.



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Kingsley Jayasekera: They are really, I would say, you know, low density, urban land usage in a typical Hong Kong park in the city. Every space is demarcated for a specific function. So you don't really have this general areas where you can just sit and relax. So people have really responded to the park because they can come with their picnic mats and their little tents and they can bring their kids and food and they can just actually just be there all day.

And I think that, that is a huge thing because it's about building trust. And I think that element of trust is starting to really be built because people can see that there's a way of running a public space without having loads of pictograms saying this is forbidden, this is forbidden. If, and it often in Hong Kong, when the sad thing is you go anywhere and there's a long list of pictograms and saying all the things you can't do.

And there are lots of rules stopping people. And, it's actually very unnecessary because people in Hong Kong are very well behaved? You know, they actually have a very good sense of community. So you can see these spaces run much more, much more self-managed and where was actually generally the tradition in Hong Kong is that it's incredibly over-managed, which is a pity.

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Adrian Ellis: So tell me a bit about the sequencing because clearly a great deal of thought will be given to that. And I'm sure part, partly it was logistical, but also it was about how to build the identity. So Xiqu came first, I think. So what is Xiqu?

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Kingsley Jayasekera: Okay so Xiqu is basically what we would know as Chinese opera. And it's the traditional name for Chinese opera. And so it's an important art form. Uh, Cantonese opera is still very, very popular in Hong Kong. It's actually worth noting. It's one of the art forms that can exist in many ways without subsidy, because it has a very strong, loyal audience base.

And all over the city, you know, you do get these bamboo theatres popping up, doing performances, and they're quite beautiful spaces, these temporary theatres. And they can often hold up to a thousand people, but there hadn't really been anywhere specifically dedicated to support the art form at a high level. There were some other theatres that were quite, you know, not in the best of condition, there was nowhere to really give it a grander status.

So the idea of the Xiqu Centre was somewhat, it would be a home for Cantonese opera, but also introduce other forms of opera because quite common, you get company and companies coming, visiting from other major cities in the mainland, and really, really having somewhere as a grand symbol of that. So it has a particular usage and a particular audience space, but it is important for the art form and for the city.



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Kingsley Jayasekera: And it is recognised, Cantonese Opera is recognised, you know, significantly as an important art form. And this is all has to do with the kind of, you know, the cultural heritage of Hong Kong. So that got prioritised firstly, at one end of the district. And then quite realistically, the other end, there was a strong focus on um, because there was a lot of interest in, in outdoor events. Doing the park, create an arts pavilion as a space where M+ could do a lot of its early exhibitions and then really um, working very quickly towards opening um, M+ because M+ is probably their kind of like, one of the key anchors of the district because it's a such a huge museum and there's always been an important element within the district.

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Adrian Ellis: So, describe in a little more detail M+, because the M+ was, as I remember originally conceived, not as one museum, but as a series of museum – a museum of ink, a museum of design, a contemporary art museum. I think there was a fourth one too. I can't remember.

And then at some point, quite a long time ago, the decision was, was to make it into a single institution. Is that right?

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Kingsley Jayasekera: Possibly so. I mean, I think there were various discussions about how these things could be done. And one of the interesting things, when it's about building a cultural district is: how many buildings do you actually need and how much do you kind of pull these things apart or how much is it more sensible to aggregate them together? And that's an interesting point, because for example, the Lyric, really combines the uses of two different buildings together into one space, you know, to make it – and that comes with challenges too. And might be worth talking about those difficulties later on. You know, it comes with a number of particular challenges, but at the same time, there's aggregation and certainly, you know, with M+ we've ended up with a substantial building.

The whole building itself is um, 65,000 square meters. You know, it has a 17,000 square meters of gallery space. So it's, you know, it's, it's as large as, uh, as Tate Modern was when it opened. And, and it clearly positions itself as being a museum of contemporary visual culture. So visual art, design architecture, moving image. So it has quite a wide remit. And the aim really is not to have it so broken up into those different areas like ink art or things like that, but really kind of quite a much more fluid approach.

So, you know, because one of the fascinating things, and this is always what happens whenever you try and compartmentalise anything, it's actually, everybody wants to work in the crossover points. They don't want to work firmly in their area. So all of a sudden, you know, the influence of ink art into different areas, people are bridging gaps all the time.

And so M+ is conceived as a building that would do that. And this idea behind visual culture is very, very powerful actually, because one thing I would say is quite interesting and a very interesting debate – talking about, you know, should we call ourselves a museum of visual culture?



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Kingsley Jayasekera: Because people are nervous, will people understand that, or should we just say it's visual art but a lot more. Well I said no, no, visual culture is exactly what it is because Hong Kong above all, it is a city of visual culture. You know, it's, it's something that, I mean, whenever people think of cities in Asia, a lot of times in their mind, they're thinking of Hong Kong, it's so distinctive.

You know, they think of, you know, the signs, the neon, they think of so many of the, you know, the city scape. It's such a strong city of visual culture. So having a museum visual culture here is actually very fitting.

Adrian Ellis: In fact, didn't you acquire a collection of neon?

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Kingsley Jayasekera: Yeah, we actually have a few, we actually have a few neons. And if you go to M+ at the moment, you can see two very significant pieces of neon on public display, outside the building. They're in the bottom of the building which we call the CSF (Conservation and Storage Facility), which is where all the collections are stored and there's an open area and you can look through the glass and you can see a neon sign, one familiar, majong parlour and the other one is from a restaurant called Sammy's Kitchen, a very famous old restaurant.

And it was a neon cow, and both of them are visible and they're quite popular places for photo spots now. So yes, there's a neon, neon plays a significant part because it's something that is already disappearing from Hong Kong, but people have a very strong feeling towards. We did a, a substantial project a number of years ago that I was involved in, getting people to take photographs of neon signs, to create a neon sign map of Hong Kong so that we could actually record them before they were taken down, because many of them are being taken down simply because they're falling out of repair, they're difficult to maintain, they're costly. So that neon element is disappearing from the city, but it's something that people feel very, very drawn to.

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Adrian Ellis: So Xiqu at one end, M+ at the other uh, Freespace arts pavilion. Your task was to develop not just an audience, but a community around these and to develop the idea that this is integral to civic and cultural life in Hong Kong, and also for it to appeal to a much wider group, including mainland China, international tourists, et cetera – a completely intimidating task.

Tell us how you approached it.

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Kingsley Jayasekera: It is a very, it's a massive task, but what's fascinating about Hong Kong is, it's a city that is quite like a village really. I mean, it's difficult to describe a city of seven and a half million people as a village, but in many ways it really is.



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Kingsley Jayasekera: I mean, and one of the important things it was important to do, when we look at the first level, which is the local level, was to really recognise that, you know, many of the ways that people have viewed arts audiences in Hong Kong was a very, very narrow lens. You know, people would look at them, so you'd talk as only having one existence.

So they would talk about the classical music audience or the ballet audience or the dance audience. And they would talk about them in a way where these people didn't exist apart from the time they were in the theatre experiencing that art form, and quite realistically, people are much more complex than that. They have different lives.

So I think the element really has been, first of all, understanding a little bit more about those audiences, the arts audiences and how they interact and the different things they go and how they act within as, within that, you know, their life stages, you know, how they act as when they're being a parent, as opposed to when they're in their own leisure time with their friends.

And the reason why this is important is first of all those people who are your early adopters, they're your key early stakeholders. But the other thing was in Hong Kong, a lot of effort is spent marketing to these people. Now there's a lot of focus on the core audience and that's because there's been no history of direct marketing to these people.

There's been no real great history of loyalty or membership you know, it's always been quite limited. So we really, really might've find a way of tying into these people. And then the next level has been doing things outside of these spaces, doing activities in the park. Opening yourself up because often the venue is the biggest barrier, you know, crossing that where shelter venues is something that can be quite intimidating for people, makes it harder to have an extra block.

There are a number of things that go on with a district, that one is the fact that public space leaks into the building. So for example, the upper level of M+, the terrace is all public space. The whole of the atrium to the Xiqu is public space. So, you know, the public space flows into these buildings, but also the events flow out.

And I think the key thing I was really wanting to do was move beyond what was the core audience; the people who, you know, shouldn't have to see a poster on a wall, you know, to know that there's an important concert on, you shouldn't have to do that. So then a lot of that has been around trying to kind of grow things like the e-list.

I did the first audience segmentation study in Hong Kong a number of years ago where we really looked to audiences and their habits and behaviours, and we divided the population into Hong Kong into 10 key segment types. So we could start to understand their particular interests and what it was, and see them much, much more as complete individuals. So we can understand a little bit more about the challenges they face, the difficulties, that actually make it harder for them to come and see things or who they would rather come and see things with.



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Kingsley Jayasekera: So a lot of it is around that, just trying to put a human face to something. And that's one of the issues I think with these kinds of cultural district plans, they often seem very high level.

And the other end of it, there's a very human or, you know, real audience. And it's how you bridge that gap. How do you make it so that it feels like somewhere they feel comfortable. And I think particularly in the case of West Kowloon, because it's a completely new district um, it doesn't have the advantages where you're working with older habited spaces that have a, you know, a significant history. People are walking into a blank space. So you know, you're trying to connect with people.

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[MUSIC TRANSITION]

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Adrian Ellis: So, social media is clearly very important generally in culture. I know from my experience with Hong Kong, people live in social media in Hong Kong. How has social media played a part in your, your comms strategy, your uh, intelligence gathering and where's it going?

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Kingsley Jayasekera: Yeah. I mean, social media is, it's so significant here. You can't escape from it. And also, as the district grows and particularly as we open up to the mainland, it becomes even more significant because, you know, Hong Kong is still lagging behind what's happening on the mainland, which is moving at such an incredible pace.

Uh, absolutely. It's had a big influence in what we do. I mean, you know, the role of KOLs, you know, Key Opinion Leaders, the role of bloggers and different influencers is so significant. So, you know, you have to really think about how you open up your spaces to these people because they can really reach out in ways that you can't directly.

Um, so we are looking at opportunities all the time to kind of let people take images. And we have to think about those locations. What are the great spots? What are the great selfie moments for people? Um, people want to build stories for themselves. And so what we're finding is we're signing incredibly talented photographers, who were coming and taking stunning architectural photographs of the Xiqu Centre and M+.

And then a huge number of people also who are inserting themselves into the story and taking pictures of themselves in the building or in front of the logo. And if you go onto Instagram and you just put in, you know, hashtag and then Xiqu Centre or hashtag, M+ and you see the amount of content being generated, it's phenomenal.

The biggest challenge here is of course, is that you're dealing with multiple social media channels as well. That gets quite intimidating, because as well as, you know, Facebook or Twitter or Instagram, you know, you've got WeChat, Xiao Hong Shu (Little Red Book) you know, you know, you've got these different platforms and we've been experimenting with different platforms, like things that Bilibili on the main land, you know.



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Kingsley Jayasekera: There are different channels that you can use, but coming back to all of them, what links them is the amount of really, really strong user generated content. And the quality of it is actually quite incredible, certainly in terms of imagery. And certainly anyone who's thinking about building a venue now or creating a district has to think about those great placemaking opportunities. The other thing we're doing is building into other aspects.

So for example, in our district app, with the AR, you know, AR wayfinding, also building in filters. So for example, we have a lot of people who have pets to park. We have a little augmented reality dog, called Linus and you can play with the dog and get your picture taken with them. So this idea of building in experiences into our own channels that allow people then to take images and share them.

We also have a whole series of neon signs where people can take pictures with neon signs and share those. So that's definitely something that people have to start building into. They have to start considering how you can add that kind of value to people's visits.

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Adrian Ellis: You've also talked about, uh, an exercise in which you take a much more holistic view of your audience and you try and understand them – not as simply a ballet attender or an opera attender, but as people with complex lives. And then you try and work out how you can, as it were satisfying needs within those lives.

The first stage of that, it sounds like is segmentation. But what do you do once you have segmented in some, in some way your audience, in a way that captures the essence of those different types? How do you move from, as it were a slightly abstract understanding to engaging them, and as I understand it also at an individual level, beginning to build up profiles of, of that potential audience?

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Kingsley Jayasekera: So, yeah, I mean, one thing we've been really trying to do and, and, I'll be honest with you – some of this really has been stalled. Um, you know, we've had with COVID particularly, we've been through some quite difficult things but, generally the logic behind this is really trying to kind of jewel together more complete customer journeys for people.

Recognising that particularly at certain times, you know, that's when families are likely to come. So what are the things that else they would most like to know? Are they going to be driving or are they going to come by public transport? So just trying, I mean, it's very gentle interventions to try and raise things up in their awareness and let people know how easy it is that people know for example, that you can borrow a buggy at the, the museum, that people know that we have bikes for hire.

So we will just try to string together stories. And sometimes that is done by segmentation through things like e-list. Sometimes it's also done through, we have a district wide app where we can, and that's linked to the CRM system so we can delve deeper into people. We can start to give people more relevant messaging.



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Kingsley Jayasekera: And you're trying to just really give people a sense without being excessively intrusive that we are feeding them information that is useful to them. So it's about that relevance of information. So in the long-term what it will mean is, over time, we would hope they start to understand.

So you would understand, for example, myself, as an attender, that I have a number of different personas really, not a single one, that I will go with my wife to see dance because she happens to like dance and I will do that, but I actually also, go see music gigs with friends and that actually I still am interested in certain events that happen on a Saturday afternoon like workshops because I have children. Now I do all of those things quite as distinct moments and I am understanding and at different moments, I need different things.

That's where the great opportunity is because the amazing thing about cultural districts is, they can probably start to do something with data that nobody else has really been able to do. Um, if you look at a shopping mall, you know, it can track people through the mall, but it doesn't have to have access into the shops.

And it's only one aspect of an experience, but the great thing about what, you know, what you're doing with the cultural district is it has immense breadth in terms of all the top spots that you can have for the day. You know, whether you go to a museum, a show, eat, shop, just relax in the park. It can have incredible depth.

Because in your area that you're interested, you could be a really passionate expert in something. And it also has great longevity. You know, you can, you can be an active supporter of an arts district, to a company, a theatre for 40, 50 years, and it may actually go through generations. So I think that the potential – and this is really wanted right now, is potential, because we're nowhere near at that level, is these ideas of these really long lasting relationships.

And what's fascinating about it is that actually becomes important because it is the use of data to benefit the customer. It really is about making that customer feel valued and special. It's having that data available to actually remember. And if we, if anyone's talking about great customer experience, now when you go to a lovely hotel or something, and people remember who you are, it's the idea that if you go into the district, that people will know who you are and you don't have to explain yourself again and again.

And this becomes very important when you start looking at the things that will matter, like membership. It's very frustrating if I go to one venue and I'm a member at another venue and people don't even recognise I'm actually a member. So one of the key things is how you can tie together those experiences, how you can give people a complete journey, but how you can also really recognise and value them and share a journey with them.

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Adrian Ellis: And what are the data points that you collect to build profile?



[00:33:12]

Kingsley Jayasekera: So a lot of it is from purchases. A lot of it is from also other forms of registration for events, related to paid tickets. A lot of it is about sign-ins and increasingly that will be about sign-ins in the district. So, you know, different locations, we're looking at how we can increase that kind of level of signing at different points.

We're trying to track people through the district app, I mentioned. We work with a local company in terms of developing the app, but we're working with a company called Pointer who have worked with GPS and beacon location.

So we can start looking at that as a way of following people through the district, but also giving them information that certain points when they arrive at points, helping them, guide them through things using augmented reality. So at the moment that kind of data collection landscape is still in its sort of infancy.

But it's definitely one in the future. I mean, obviously if you work in marketing, the idea of omni-channel marketing is very significant. Um, there are lots of issues there because you have to have a very strong sense of how you use this data um, how you keep it safe and how you protect it.

And again, I hit the key point here is always making sure that customers understand that that data has been held for their benefit. So one thing I did work on was an idea of really trying to make that data very transparent to the public. So, you know, having uh, portal whereby the public can very much, see their own data.

[00:34:44]

Adrian Ellis: So you've broached the territory that I was going to go to. So there are clearly issues around use of, and access to data. I guess two simple questions: One is do you feel confident that the data is safe from exploitation or appropriation by either government or others who would want to use it for purposes that aren't related necessarily to the visitor experience and then the other is, is there resistance to signing the acceptance that says yes, all my data is going to be tracked.

[00:35:17]

Kingsley Jayasekera: So there were very strict rules on data governance. And as a public body, we have to be very careful on that, on what we do. And we have a very clear policy that says we wouldn't pass data to a third party without consent. And the data is very secure.

Um, so I think that's pretty clear and understood. We have to be responsible with that data and understand how it's being tapped and why we're keeping it in the app. I think that the public actually, are very accepting of this, I mean, the reality is, in a city of where, I mean, mobile penetration in Hong Kong is incredibly high.

Uh, the average person has, I think 2.5 mobile phones. It's ridiculously high.

Adrian Ellis: It's the average.



[00:36:07]

Kingsley Jayasekera: Yeah, it's the average, and if you go anywhere in Hong Kong, literally everybody is looking at their mobile phone all the time. It's the primary device that everybody uses for everything. So people are always doing this. They're always passing their data and geolocation is incredibly important here.

Um, so I think it's become accepted. And what people are looking at is the convenience it gives and the idea that it makes their life better.

[00:36:35]

Adrian Ellis: So the broader context in which the district was conceived, I think probably now, you know, some 20 odd years ago, and the one that's been realised is very different. For all sorts of reasons. Art forms have changed, geopolitics have changed. The circumstances of Hong Kong has changed. Technology has changed and you've lived through at least half of those changes.

How do you think as a model, a cultural district conceived in whole cloth uh, if you like, as a piece of uh, major urban planning, how well do you think that model fits the way in which people want to use and enjoy culture today?

[00:37:17]

Kingsley Jayasekera: I think the model still works quite clearly when you build something in a location like that, you know, it's a prime location, so people are looking for something that has a significance. It has to be something that stands out in a city that has a lot of things that stand out about it already, so it had to have that kind of weight and gravitas to it.

You hope that it can strike a balance like any major city, which has a large amount of tourists between the interests of the local population and the visitors. And you hope that they can, you know, they can both enjoy the district. And I think where that's a challenge sometimes is that issue of, can you maintain that authenticity?

As you're visiting the district, you want to feel you're in Hong Kong. I think that's important for people. International visitors want to feel that they're in the city, they want to feel their experience in Hong Kong, not something that is an imitation or, or a whole new thing. So I think that the model itself, I mean, it's challenging to build a district of this size.

Undoubtedly and there were practical issues, definitely challenging: transport, connectivity, the practical challenges of building a district where you have so many different venues potentially, and particularly because the master plan takes all the traffic below ground, you know, you have essential routes.

So there are elements within the master plan that I think will be challenging to deal with. But I think that the idea that above ground, you have a district where people can walk an avenue, a two and a quarter mile waterfront promenade, is very compelling for people. And I think really the, the interesting things will be one, whether the district can work with the amount of visitors it gets.



[00:39:08]

Kingsley Jayasekera: Can it still become a pleasant, is there a pleasant place to be where people can find that little bit of space, that little bit of shelter? I think that will be one that's going to be a significant challenge. I think that how you animate the buildings, because one of the challenges with theatres is, they're actually quite dead buildings often; you build a box of 1500 seats, and then for 20 minutes before 7:30, it's full of people. And then they will inside for two and a half hours, and then they leave 10 minutes later. So even though, you know, theatres are great for bringing people together, actually often they don't contribute much to the vibrancy, really.

So it's how you can actually animate those spaces. So there's, there's some challenges like that, but I feel that, I feel that the district itself, because I think partly because Hong Kong is a city which has so much vibrancy in its streets, I just imagine that the district itself will inevitably be a vibrant place.

It will draw people because of its energy and excitement. As long as again, people don't get carried away and introduce rules that stop people enjoying themselves and having fun.

[00:40:20]

Adrian Ellis: And can the cultural institutions like M+ navigate the different expectations of, on the one hand, Chinese authorities, and on the other, the expectations of artists and audiences for freedom of expression?

[00:40:36]

Kingsley Jayasekera: I think so. I mean, if you actually look at the works being shown in M+, there are a number of works in M+ being shown that are, you know, some people would find challenging. There have been debates about some on the subject of obscenity, for example. And certainly it's quite clear that there are works, being shown that not everyone will feel happy with or that everyone would like, but that there um, that's great.

And I don't at the moment feel, that's going to change. I think we have to stay optimistic about that, but any arts institution, any major arts institution is always walking a line. It's the nature of artists to push against the boundaries. You know, they will do things that will challenge. Um, so I feel that um, it's certainly possible. I think that the public now who come to M+ have been really, really engaged and excited and I think they've seen a lot of works that, that have made them think in different ways. You know, we have, in the end, we do have works by Ai Weiwei that was obviously questioned, but whether we would, and we do, we have a number of other works that pushed boundaries in some ways.

So I think there's definitely, you know, artistic expression still there, and that's a great thing.

Adrian Ellis: And what's next up? Is that the Palace Museum?

Kingsley Jayasekera: Palace museum will open middle of next year.



[00:42:00]

Adrian Ellis: That's a very fast um, uh, conception and realisation isn't it? Because I think that was uh, not in the original plan.

[00:42:08]

Kingsley Jayasekera: Yes, that wasn't in the original master plan. So there was a location that could be found for it on the other side of the park, from where M+ is. It was also fully funded by the jockey club. So that kind of speeds things up because it came with no issues of where the money would come from.

Adrian Ellis: And it's an annex of, or, or a satellite of the, of the Palace Museum in Beijing.

Kingsley Jayasekera: I wouldn't describe it as an annex or satellite other than it has its own curatorial team. Um, so the idea being that it is a museum in Hong Kong that is able to present works from the Palace Museum in Beijing. But it has its own curators. So they're selecting works and selecting themes for exhibitions independently.

You know, they can show a massive collection of works.

Adrian Ellis: Right, so Kingsley, what's next for you?

Kingsley Jayasekera: So for me next, I'm going to take a little bit of time to relax with the family, I think, over Christmas. And then I'm not sure. I mean, there were definitely some aspects of the work I've been doing here, I do think they are very, very interesting. I mean the whole issue of cultural experience across multiple touch points and how that can be done and it's very interesting.

And so I'm also another way relate to that, the idea of navigating through data privacy, another way I've been working on is accessibility. Which often I'll be honest with you is something that gets neglected and it needs to really, really be baked into what's happening with the master plan, you know, following through with the work, with the individual architects to ensure it's there, then into operations and then into the, you know, the programme design and accessibility is something that I think that it's, it's been interesting here in Hong Kong.

I introduced the first accessibility policy for any arts organisation in Hong Kong. And I think that's been a, that helped push things through. But I, I'm not ready to kind of, give up yet. I'm keen to kind of take some of these learnings into a different area and enjoy being back in the UK for a while actually. I'll be living down in Devon having a nice time feeding sheep and goats.

[00:44:21]

Adrian Ellis: I cannot imagine a greater contrast than Hong Kong and Devon. So, it will be a uh, complete change.

Kingsley, thank you for a really fascinating account of what I think is one of the most significant cultural developments in the world at the moment and a massively important experiment. And thank you for being so open and above all, thank you for doing this whilst taking a break and packing to go to the airport. I'm extremely grateful to you.



[00:44:54]

Kingsley Jayasekera: No problem. It is very nice. Thank you very, very much.

[00:44:58]

Adrian Ellis: Listeners if you want more, check out www.thethreebells.net to find external references and other resources linked to this episode and to Kingsley's work. But first stick around for a conversation between myself and Criena, as we explore the key takeaways and actionable ideas from this conversation.

[00:45:15]

[MUSIC TRANSITION]

[00:45:22]

Adrian Ellis: Hi Criena, how's life in Australia. How's the Gold Coast?

[00:45:26]

Criena Gehrke: It's actually not too bad! This is where I do my advertorial for the Gold Coast. I've been in the pool and at the beach all day, it's been fantastic. So, I'm feeling pretty good and optimistic, notwithstanding the fact that we're still living with that C-word.

[00:45:42]

Adrian Ellis: Yeah, absolutely. And I'm, I'm looking out to a sunny, clear Italian landscape. So, great to talk to you about uh, what I hope you thought was an interesting conversation with Kingsley.

[00:45:54]

Criena Gehrke: I absolutely loved that conversation, Adrian. It really resonated with me as you know, I'm responsible for the development of a precinct that has had a long and checkered history. It's now being implemented. It's a 10 to 15 year project. So it was really interesting that some of my, I think, perceptions and misconceptions about West Kowloon were absolutely dampened because there's a lot of similarities.

Adrian Ellis: What. What are the similarities?

Criena Gehrke: (laughs) You know, I think some of the challenges that, that they've faced, that there's been false starts, there's been changes in leadership. Some of the issues with the actual sighting of West Kowloon, you know, Kingsley talked about transport connectivity. The importance of the parkland aspect with the institutions hugging it. There was a whole bunch of things that really resonated in terms of both the vision, but also those challenges. You know, I loved all those conversations about authenticity, and the importance of West Kowloon being all over the place, you know, that when the visitor comes or when you're there as a local, you want to feel as though you're in Hong Kong, not in some other place.

[00:47:23]

Adrian Ellis: Yeah. I agree. I mean, West Kowloon is uh, sort of peak top-down cultural districts, probably alongside Saadiyat Island in um, in Abu Dhabi, conceived I think in a very different time. And you're right.



[00:47:36]

Adrian Ellis: You know, the management has been dealt some pretty tough cards; scale, changing politics uh, the increasing incursion of mainland China in terms of decision-making and political freedoms in Hong Kong, quite a few abrupt changes of executive leadership.

Also I think it's fair to say that there were some pretty major false starts early. For example, the original conception I think, was that developers would plan, build, and operate the cultural facilities cross subsidised from the commercial elements. And I think that that, well after the exercise was launched, there was a change of heart, probably in response to public opinion at the time. This is in the early 2000s. So lots of changes, but really quite a lot of intelligent thinking at an operational level around phasing. I mean, I really think that the decision to begin with Chinese opera and with the bamboo theatre and Xiqu, and build up a constituency of support, the commissioning early on of, in the phasing of significant public space, which is a credible high premium in Hong Kong.

The conception of moving from a series of museums to M+ as a museum of visual culture, giving it fluidity and giving it, you know, the opportunity to work in the interstices of different disciplines, as he said, and including a strong element of popular culture and things like the neon collection.

So notwithstanding the larger uncertainties surrounding the project, the team, the operational team have really sort of pushed it forward and give it a very good chance of being a really fundamentally accepted piece of the civic and cultural life of the city.

[00:49:29]

Criena Gehrke: Yeah, there was definitely a clear articulation of that vision, the purpose and running a really, I felt, imaginative and innovative approach to programming and to that cultural infrastructure, which surprised me, I think, you know, and when you think about from the traditional right through to this re-imagining visual culture, it really is diverse and it's of that community. It was impressive. I was interested that the conversation probably didn't focus on the current political environment, as much as what I may have expected, because surely that, as you said, West Kowloon was conceived in a different time politically, and just the impact that that environment must have on this project and on that vision.

And I felt as though Kingsley was incredibly generous in his thinking, and he did give us examples of how they're doing what they can to stand firm to that freedom of expression to that contemporary arts practice. But I felt for him, you know, cause it can't have been easy.

[00:50:34]

Adrian Ellis: So I asked the question and he gave the answer. And what he said was right, that there is a dilemma. And the dilemma is that our cultural institutions, particularly those dealing with contemporary forms of expression, but all uh, interpretations of culture run up against the issue of freedom of expression.

And we are in a period uh, not just in Hong Kong, unfortunately, but globally where the freedom of expression of cultural institutions is under threat.



[00:51:17]

Adrian Ellis: It's under threat in the UK at the moment. Uh, even the financial times last week published an editorial criticising the government for its politicisation of board appointments in cultural institutions in the UK.

We are in an age um, universally, where those freedoms of expression are under threat. What do you do, if you are in a leadership position in one of those institutions? You either give up and go home or you navigate as best you can and seek to establish where the boundaries are, and seek to maintain those boundaries or progress them as best you can.

And I think that's really what he was saying. The other area, I think that I touched on, which was controversial, is that of data collection and analysis.

And from the point of view of customer experience, he made a really interesting point, which is the cultural districts that can aggregate data from a number of things from restaurants, from shops, from the different venues potentially, as is the case in West Kowloon, can build up very comprehensive pictures of their um, audiences or customers that can see them as their community, if you like.

And that offers them the potential, both for money and mission. For money, it offers them the potential to increase the number of transactions. For mission, it offers them the opportunity to offer to their community a fuller experience by knowing more things about what's happening, knowing more things about transit, knowing more things about pricing than they would otherwise.

So that's all to the good and benign. There are challenges, however, when you've got that sort of aggregate data, you have to be very careful with its uh, with its use morally and legally. And you have to probably protect it in ways that are actually genuinely difficult. Protect from hacking, protect from data invasion of various sorts.

And again, he touched on that. But I do think that over time those dilemmas are going to grow. And indeed there are voices in the cultural sector that are deprecating that sort of CRM type data collection.

[00:53:29]

Criena Gehrke: Do you think we're at danger as cultural and arts institutions, of becoming Facebook? You know, like everything's based on algorithms and don't get me wrong. I, you know, HOTA has invested a lot of time and resources in the last 12 months on a new CRM that is integrated with our ticketing system and journey mapping, you know, I have a wonderful young gun whose role is marketing automation specialist. If you'd asked me 20 years what that was – and I'm not sure I still know, but I do know that we're really increasingly playing in that digital space, at that data is key. But I just sort of wonder about it sometimes, because at the end of the day, it can flip us back into feeling quite transactional, I think. You know, yes, we're trying to create these amazing experiences and we're trying to understand our market segmentation, but I'd hate for us to become so annoying. Like when you're on social media and suddenly you're getting all of these ads for dog food, because somehow they know you've got a dog.



[00:54:39]

Adrian Ellis: Yeah. I do. And I think that, um, I think that there is increasing revulsion that uh, on the part of consumers, so I do think that that's an issue. I also think that there are common sense overrides. I know that knowing your audience is incredibly important. And social media is not a substitute for hanging out at your venue and getting to know and watching the patterns of, and getting to know the individuals in your audiences and particularly in the performing arts, because it's, it's so much easier to do than in museums, or in museums and galleries too, there is no substitute for, no segmentation and no aggregate data analysis and no social media is a substitute for your instinct for your audience, based on your experience of talking to them, your experience of seeing who they are and seeing how they move through the venue.

[00:55:28]

Criena Gehrke: I'm in raging agreement with that, you know, and it's interesting. Cause I have conversations with my incredible programming team and we do, do a lot of data analytics, market segmentation, really understanding our audiences and visitors because they're not just audiences, you know, visitors to the broader precinct and to continually question, what kind of experience can we offer them, particularly unique experiences.

But as I said, the programming team and the curators, you also don't want to get to the stage where you've analysed creativity and imagination and artfulness out of those curatorial and creative teams. And the example I use rightly or wrongly is, who would have thought that the great zeitgeist of our time would be cat memes. You know, who could have predicted that? So, you know, it's just this interesting thing that we shouldn't lose sight of the word that we tend not to use very often these days, Adrian, which is talent, you know, like our curators and our artists and our creatives. They are talented people who can create really great stories and moments and experiences for visitors and for communities. And it's not based on any kind of market segmentation or data.

[00:56:47]

Adrian Ellis: Yes. And one needs to lead as well as follow. If you're too captured by your analysis of people's dispositions, and then it's difficult to cut through them and lead and offer propositions that hadn't occurred to them.

[00:57:01]

Criena Gehrke: Yeah, absolutely. But having said all of that, I think that the work and the impact that Kingsley has made in West Kowloon is extraordinary. I thought it was a really fantastic conversation, full of great reflections, but also collegial support for those of us that are developing precincts, no matter where we are in the world and the politics of the day.

[00:57:24]

Adrian Ellis: I thought he was very interesting on two challenges that he identified. One was that the character of the public spaces that is currently the case may not continue to be the case if it is as popular as he anticipates. And that's the highline problem, which is, which is the problem of success. And that if it becomes a super destination, then that sort of casualness of hanging space will begin to deteriorate. And it's a problem we don't often think about because we think, oh gosh, that's going to be our problem.



[00:57:57]

Adrian Ellis: Then we don't have any problems, you know, too successful. But many of these districts have become very, very popular and that popularity begins to alter the character. So that was one. His other was an observation, which is, where you have a lot of performance spaces.

Performance spaces are when not used, quite dead spaces. And the animation of them is a challenge. Because unlike, because of the hours that we tend to go to performances. So you have these spaces that are dead during the day or are closed off. One of the things that he talked about is making those spaces as porous as possible. Having a view, you know, having, public access to roofs, those sorts of things. So I thought that was very interesting because it is, you know, it is true. And it's a challenge that anyone in performing arts is well aware of, but they, I think, have thought pretty intelligently about how to maximise the porosity and openness of performance venues. I thought that was interesting.

[00:58:53]

Criena Gehrke: Yeah, I thought that that was really interesting too. And something I hadn't really thought about in the same way. And you know, the fact that he was so honest that they had dead spaces during the day when they're not in performance – my, did it made me thoughtful about what might happen with our future performing arts centre and how you do create that porous, inside, outside, the daytime use, you know, we're all so focused on the night time ecology of our districts and precincts, or I know I am, but sometimes you forget that the daily life of some of those spaces.

[00:59:28]

Adrian Ellis: So I think we're both seeing that Kingsley and his colleagues are doing, have done a fairly remarkable job with a project that is not in a sense troubled, but was definitely conceived both in scale and in ambition in a very different time, but have adapted intelligently, both scales, subject matter and approach to what is a different set of circumstances in 2021.

[00:59:55]

Criena Gehrke: I felt like it was an extraordinary and optimistic conversation that showed that these districts and cultural institutions, and let's face it, the arts, we just keep going and we achieve great things in all sorts of conditions.

It was great, thoroughly enjoyed it. Thanks Adrian.

[01:00:17]

Adrian Ellis: Thank you. The Three Bells is produced by AEA Consulting, and supported by The Binnacle Foundation for the Global Cultural Districts Network,. The podcasts and supporting materials can be found at www.thethreebells.net. And if you haven't already done so, please subscribe to our feed and rate us on your podcast listening platform of choice. My name's Adrian Ellis. Thank you so much for being with us today. And I look forward to joining you again soon.

[01:00:44]

THEME MUSIC

