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WELLINGTON CHINESE GARDEN, FRANK KITTS PARK MASTERPLAN COMPETITION, WELLINGTON WATERFRONT

REPORT FROM THE WELLINGTON CHINESE GARDEN COMMITTEE 12th November 2007

INTRODUCTION

This report is a summary of the findings and recommendations of the Chinese Garden Committee (WCGC) Meeting held at the Wellington Waterfront offices on Monday, 5th November 2007. The attendees were :

- Mrs Esther Fung, Representative, WCGC
- Mr Harvey Wu, Representative, WCGC
- Mr Ken Chan, Chair of the Committee
- Ms Oi Choong, Landscape Architect and Consultant Adviser to the Committee.

The report also incorporates comments from members of the Wellington Chinese Garden Committee following a presentation to the members on the same evening by Ms.Choong.

The WCGC reviewed all of the five competition schemes for the design of the Chinese Garden in Frank Kitts Park. The criteria used for assessing each design included the following:

- **Location and context**
The appropriateness of the Garden location and its relationship to the rest of the Park, city and harbour
- **Design**
The overall presentation of the Chinese Garden and the contemporary interpretation of the elements of traditional Chinese Garden design
- **Functionality**
Suitability for a range of functions as stated in the Brief and circulation requirements
- **Symbolism and Interpretive opportunities**
The design 'narrative' and opportunities for interpreting the Chinese experience in Wellington
- **Feasibility**
Ease of building and cost
- **Sustainability**
Robustness, potential to be enduring and meet the 'test of time'

The Committee would like to commend all the competition entrants for their imaginative designs and the thought that has been invested in all the schemes for the Wellington Chinese Garden.

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COMMENTS

SCHEME 1

The Park master plan is divided into three roughly equal parts with the Chinese Garden located on top of the existing car park structure, enjoying good prospect and views. The Chinese Garden is skillfully integrated with the topography and successfully captures the borrowed landscape of the harbour and adjacent spaces. To this end, it appears 'larger' than its true dimensions.

Of all the schemes, this is also the most conventional interpretation of a Chinese Garden. The elements of traditional Chinese garden design (water, winding paths, gateways, tea pavilion) are composed in a compact design on the deck of the existing car park, separate from the rest of the park.

Although the design is well considered, the challenges of building on a deck structure are apparent, marginalizing the opportunities for planting, shelter and barrier free access.

The configuration of the spaces and elements provide a range of opportunities for interpretation of the local Chinese experience and culture, although this is not immediately realized in the current design.

The success of the Garden will rely strongly on detail development to convey its intended vision.

Whilst recognizing the potential of this scheme, the location, cost of installation and overcoming the structural constraints of the existing car park would seriously compromise the design of the Garden and prevent it from realizing its full potential.

SCHEME 2

This scheme is a most engaging and elegant response to the design brief.

The proposed Chinese Garden is an axial arrangement of landscaped open 'boxes within boxes' or 'outdoor rooms', nestled between two large lawns, the City Lawn and Harbour Lawn. The 'boxes' are modulated to form gateways, courtyards, 'chamber' and 'gallery' spaces; each space is landscaped and charged with symbolism and meaning. The underlying narrative, "The Garden of Beneficence" vividly prescribes a wide canvas for interpreting the Chinese cultural landscape and experience in Wellington.

Local and distant views of the Harbour City, places of significance to the Chinese and Maori peoples, are captured by openings in the 'boxes', framing a variety of access points and vistas along the Garden's strong organizational axis. The 'cellular' arrangement of the spaces is robust but flexible, capable of being adapted to a wide range of uses and functions. A teahouse overlooks the Promenade and Harbour, an active focus at the 'climax' of the Garden. The teahouse will also complement the proposed park facilities that will revive and animate the southern end of Frank Kitts Park.

The Wellington Chinese Garden Committee is unanimous in its support of this Garden design for the following reasons:

- The Chinese Garden is centrally located and works well with the proposed Park framework. The Park master plan is commendable for its sustainability principles and sympathetic enhancement of the key elements of its current layout (the playground, lawns, car park and promenade)
- It is an elegantly simple design yet allows complexity and richness in its forms and spaces.
- The Garden has a universal and timeless quality and allows many aspects of traditional Chinese garden design to be interpreted in a fresh and contemporary way.
- The Garden is easily adaptable to a range of functions and uses including major events.

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- The “box concept” is ideal for fund raising purposes. It allows the WCGC to offer clearly defined areas to our sister cities and hopefully other major benefactors to contribute to its cost and to receive naming rights.
- The teahouse, together with the proposed park facilities will complement each other and revive the southern end of the park.
- Because of its structure, Garden is relatively simple to realize and maintain.

Without detracting from the strengths of the current design, the Chinese Garden has the potential to be improved in a number of ways. These include the following :

- Careful framing of the view axis along Willeston Street to ensure that key vistas are not compromised.
- The Garden appears to be ‘smaller’ than the other schemes, perhaps because of the distinctive edges shown on plan and elevation. Softening or blurring some of the edges of the Garden will allow it to ‘expand’ in feel and integrate with the adjacent Lawns
- Refining the design of ‘enclosed’ spaces to enhance visual permeability and address safety concerns.

SCHEME 3

This visually distinctive scheme incorporates ‘feng shui’ principles across the whole of Frank Kitts Park and uses the entire Park to ‘draw on’ and ‘celebrate the principles of Chinese Garden design’.

The Park is divided into three highly structured precincts symbolizing three states of the Universe, “Heaven”, “Man” and “Earth”. The design and location of the Chinese Garden elements, circulation patterns, gateways and spaces within these precincts are generated by the singular use of “feng shui” principles.

This has resulted in a powerful but perhaps less flexible park design. It is difficult to imagine how the park and integrated Chinese Garden could accommodate the simple, open space activities highlighted in the brief or be adapted to accommodate larger crowds for special events.

The arrangement of apparently ‘disparate elements’ and in-between spaces also detract from the overall identity and coherence of the Chinese Garden.

Although imaginative in scope and admirable for its deep knowledge and application of ‘feng shui’ principles, the Committee believes that this scheme is highly ambitious in its concept and scale of intervention, and would be difficult to interpret and achieve.

SCHEME 4

The Park master plan is a skillful, contemporary design which manipulates ‘folded’ surfaces across the whole park to create a series of dedicated open spaces.

The Chinese Garden is located along the city edge at Jervois Quay, anchored by a linear water feature (symbolizing the journey), planted embankments and a series of pavilions which chart the ‘arrival, integration and celebration’ of the Chinese experience in Wellington.

Whilst the Garden Committee is impressed by the versatility and contemporary interpretation of this design, there are a number of concerns as follows:

- The location of the Chinese Garden adjacent to a busy street will compromise and diminish the feeling of tranquility that is essential to the experience of the Garden
- The Garden turns its back to the rest of the Park and the folded landform and location will prevent a direct relationship to the Harbour (and hence, symbolically, to the original ‘homeland’) giving an overtone of bad ‘feng shui’.
- The folded embankment would compromise opportunities to ‘spill out’ into more level areas of lawn.
- The direct, axial circulation and tilting plane of the planted embankment reduces the potential for including the more subtle landscape experiences inherent in traditional Chinese Garden design.

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- The concentration of activity at the street edge and number of pavilions would create a challenge for organized activities and events in the Garden.
- The philosophy of the Wellington Chinese Garden is to show the integration of the Chinese community as full members in the Wellington and New Zealand society. The pavilions will need to be sensitively and skillfully designed or they could serve as a 'barrier' between the Garden and the City, making the Garden less potent and inviting.
- The maintenance of so many pavilions could be an added burden in the longer term.
- The different elements of the Chinese Garden are less developed than in other schemes. Despite the admirable narrative which links the design, considerable resolution will be required to create an immediately recognizable 'Chinese' character, given the challenges inherent in the current design.

SCHEME 5

This is a bold and dynamic design whereby the 'Chinese experience' and garden elements are vividly interpreted as an intense web of 'red' surfaces, pathways, repetitive frames and iconic red pavilions animating the water's edge.

The contemporary interpretation and juxtaposition of the Chinese Garden elements provide an exciting, fresh outlook for the Park, although somewhat overwhelming in their intensity.

The Committee believes that even if their impact is reduced, there are a number of issues relating to the realization of this design:

- The northern location of the Chinese Garden is of some concern, especially in relation to the activities and 'spill out' from the adjacent Events Centre
- The 'open form' plan and spread of some of the elements throughout the whole park dilute the experience of the Garden. This lack of connectedness could potentially make the Chinese story in New Zealand seem rather disparate, rather than part of the continuum of New Zealand history.
- The seamless edges to the Garden and lack of 'containment' encourage flexibility but would, at the same time, make it difficult to function separately from the rest of the park, such as during special Chinese events or celebrations.
- The free-form circulation patterns prevent a strong sense of 'arrival' into or 'departure' from the Garden. (although the Committee believe that this has the potential to be addressed in the design)
- The proposed changes and degree of intervention at the water's edge could be an expensive exercise.
- The opportunities for interpretive elements and calligraphy on the frames is potentially exciting but essentially a two dimensional experience; the frames could also lend their surfaces to graffiti.

Whilst the Committee appreciates the strengths of this design, we believe that it will have to overcome considerable design constraints posed by its chosen location, open ended plan and somewhat overpowering 'scale', which is both a strength and weakness of the scheme.

CONCLUSION

The Wellington Chinese Garden Committee is unanimous in its decision that Scheme 2, "The Garden of Beneficence" best meets the objectives and criteria established for the Chinese Garden.

This is an elegantly simple design which is very well integrated into the Park, addresses the symbolic and functional requirements of the brief and captures the quintessential aspects of traditional Chinese Gardens in a thoughtful, contemporary way.

The design has many merits and has the potential to be refined and developed further without compromising the integrity of the overall park design.

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The Committee also supports the introduction of an activated edge to the south of the Park as this has the potential to invigorate this important but under-realized waterfront area and establish a symbiotic relationship with the Chinese Garden.

The Committee is of the opinion that the other four schemes are less successful in meeting the selection criteria for the design for the Wellington Chinese Garden. Despite their merits, the schemes will require considerable refinement to overcome the design and implementation issues raised above.