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Arts scene's growth is a matter of care

Give city's talents education and opportunities to perform, not just the bricks and mortar, designer says

The government may be busy consulting the public about the design of the West Kowloon arts hub, but is it becoming too concerned about how many buildings should be built and trees planted on the site?

There are now growing calls for the authorities to pay more attention to education and the promotion of artists, instead of bricks and mortar.

The problem is an old one for the creative industries in this city. As Henry Steiner, the "Father of Hong Kong Design" said: "Everything translates into real estate and most businessmen, especially developers, do not understand assets like intellectual property."

In his view, the key to promoting creative industries in Hong Kong is not to wait for the arts hub to be built, but to give artists more opportunities to perform.

"There are wonderful spaces like

the Central Police Station and the Married Police Quarters, both on Hollywood Road, standing empty and idle. All they need is the cost of whitewash to be usable."

Things are slowly improving. Some shopping centres in Central and Tsim Sha Tsui have offered venues for artists to perform. One wonders if other shopping centres will also follow suit.

"Business only needs to provide the soil and water. The artists will be the seeds," Steiner said. "This would allow natural growth instead of having government planning on how to develop the arts."

Steiner, 77, designed the Standard Chartered Bank banknotes and a range of company logos – including HSBC, Hilton Hotels, Hong Kong Jockey Club, Wellcome, Hongkong Land and Lane Crawford. He is celebrating his 50th year of living in the city with a one-man

photographic exhibition entitled "Western Campsite Monument" at Hanart TZ Gallery in Central. The show will end tomorrow.

Speaking at the exhibition, Steiner emphasised he was not switching his career from designer to photographer, but he wanted to use an artistic viewpoint to express his feelings about Hong Kong through photography.

Arriving in Hong Kong in September, 1961, Steiner said he remembered that he had flown from

New York to San Francisco, and then on to Honolulu and Tokyo before landing in the city to work as the design director of The Asia Magazine.

He fell in love with the city, so his original nine-month contract turned into a stay of five decades, during which he founded his own business, Steiner&Co, got married and had two sons.

In Steiner's view, the products that best represent Hong Kong are Yuanyang (an equal mix of coffee and Hong Kong-style milk tea), the Star Ferry and the trams. "The Star Ferry is an endangered species. It should be protected," he said.

While Steiner said there had been a few local successful brands, such as fashion retailers Shanghai Tang and GOD, "overall, we have not seen many new brands since the handover of Hong Kong to China in 1997. This is disappointing".

Disappointing but not surprising, as Hong Kong firms like to trade but do not like the risks associated with developing their own brands.



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