

Building Alliances for Culture in Your Municipality

Victoria Stasiuk

Wrapped around the current dialogue surrounding the importance of cities and the “New Deal,” there is a growing awareness that we must seek out innovations and best practices for culture. Building on the work of Jane Jacobs and Richard Florida, many are turning their attention increasingly towards how to best structure governance systems and funding processes for culture at the local level. This article will examine a couple of current examples in municipal cultural development, looking at how local governments can build bridges with community organizations and business leaders.

Quality of Life Factors

While much of the attention for the New Deal for municipalities has focused on how the revenue received from the gas tax can be directed towards infrastructure and transportation programs at the local level, there is also an increasing awareness that municipalities must work hard to shape the quality of life in their communities. This interest is arising as a result of the keen desire of municipal leaders to have a “positional advantage” in terms of attracting and retaining top talent, as well

as building key attractions in their community for leisure travel markets.

According to Richard Florida, today’s mobile, talented workforce seeks out those communities where they can enjoy bike pathways, a diverse urban lifestyle, as well as a “quality of place” that can be seen in the preservation of heritage properties. Over the last 10 years, many municipalities have worked hard to revitalize downtowns and create vital cultural streetscapes to attract residents and visitors towards these destinations. In London, Ontario, for example, key investments have been made in a downtown central library, a new Covent Garden Market and a new arena. While Florida has many good things to say about the diverse cultural streetscapes of Toronto and Vancouver, many citizens are interested in fostering high quality cultural experiences closer to the communities in which we live.

When searching for further proof to support Florida’s ideas, many have suggested that Jane Jacobs must be given adequate credit for a more strategic framework explaining why cities are the key economic engine for Canada. In Jacobs’ book *The Death and Life of*

Great American Cities, she outlines how history has been dominated by the prosperity of key cities. Under this framework, she describes how New York, London (U.K.), and Tokyo act as heads of the colonial empire – what we now call “world class cities.” Rather than economic competition between countries, Jacobs sees a much clearer competition between cities – each geographic region struggles to become the economic head of the empire rather than the backwater. As communities search for their “magic bullet” to escape being economically disadvantaged zones, many have sought to build cultural heritage strategies and cultural plans to build on their community strengths. Ontario’s Niagara-on-the-Lake and Stratford are often cited as successful examples of this strategy.

Pillars of Success

It has become apparent that different communities may create different governance structures for culture, based on how leadership is comprised in the particular community. Greg Baeker, in his work with the Municipal Cultural Planning Project and the more recent Re-



Victoria Stasiuk, MPA, provides research and consultation services in the areas of project management, strategic planning and cultural management to local government and cultural organizations. She is a past president of the London Arts Council, and a board member of the Canadian Cultural Research Network. She can be reached at <info@victoriastasiuk.ca>.

gional Municipal Cultural Forums Project,¹ has identified “Five Pillars” of effective municipal cultural planning and decision-making.

Political leadership – This includes the support of elected officials in positions of influence and responsibility (eg., advocates serving on executive council, as chairs of relevant standing committees).

Municipal staff – With dedicated planning and policy roles in cultural development (this group encompasses senior municipal staff such as Directors of Economic Development, Tourism, Planning and Community Services, etc.).

Local cultural leaders – This group represents the full spectrum of local arts, heritage, libraries, cultural industries, multicultural and other activity.

Local business – Support in this group is coordinated through umbrella bodies (such as chambers of commerce, economic development agencies, business improvement areas, and local tourism councils).

Education sector – This includes post-secondary institutions in the immediate municipality or region with relevant teaching and research expertise and resources.

To illustrate some of these key success factors in municipal cultural development, we can use London, Ontario (a mid-sized city at 350,000 in population) and Kamloops, British Columbia (a smaller city at 80,000 in population) as two Canadian examples.

London Example

In London, Ontario, political leadership pursued a downtown revitalization plan linked to the development of the arts, cultural and heritage sectors. Two councillors worked with community cultural leaders to kick-start a strategic planning and visioning exercise on two different tracks. With staff support from the city’s planning department, the heritage and museum sector was aligned

under one planning exercise, and evolved into an organization called Landmarks London. The arts and cultural sector embarked on a strategic planning exercise initially with staff support from the city manager’s office and in partnership with the local arts council. This initiative led to the creation of a stabilization and investment program called the Community Arts Investment Program (responsibility for this program currently rests with the city’s community services department).

These sectors and programs were under extreme cut back pressure in the more recent municipal budget cycle. The Landmarks London heritage program received a much more severe cut than the Community Arts Investment Program. While the debate on why the two programs fared differently is far-ranging, some of the answers lie in how the two sectors decided to structure their governance and community engagement models. While both sectors are equally important to building a “quality of place” and building the municipality’s strategic advantage, the alliances built between the “five pillars” discussed above are critical. These must be structured in a way that builds culture at the local level so it is positioned as a key investment of the municipality.

Kamloops Example

Kamloops, British Columbia is currently branding itself as the Tournament Capital of Canada, linking into the scheduled 2010 Olympics for Vancouver. The municipality also enjoys the benefit of a university-based research program to increase the visibility and profile of culture in small cities through a project entitled “CURA – Cultural Future of Small Cities.”(see <www.cariboo.bc.ca/smallcities>). With the Kamloops Art Gallery taking the lead, the Social Sciences Humanities and Research Council of Canada has funded this

three-year project pulling together the municipality, the University College of the Cariboo and several other community, educational and cultural organizations. The researchers for this program respond very well to the issues raised by Jacobs and Florida when they state:

For the last year, the Small Cities program has been exploring the cultural challenges and possibilities facing small cities in a world increasingly dominated by large urban centres, suburban sprawl, and economic globalization. Kamloops, a city of 80,000 in the southern interior of British Columbia, is the focal point for a program of interdisciplinary research, training and knowledge sharing.²

It is interesting to note that the municipality has made recent investments in cultural planning with the approval of a budget of \$150,000 to cover the cost of a cultural master plan, short-term space resolutions and an arts and cultural manager who will work with the city’s arts and heritage groups. The municipal staff person notes that, with the city putting more money into cultural areas, “it will likely mean groups seeking city funding will find themselves undergoing more rigorous tests to qualify.” While the mayor was reluctant to commit to a new cultural facility any sooner, than in 8 to 10 years, the planning approach suggested that the municipal-

1 The Municipal Cultural Planning Project operated in 2001-2 as a program funded by the Ontario Ministry of Tourism, Culture and Recreation, the Quebec Ministry of Culture and Communications, the Bronfman Family Foundation, and the Department of Canadian Heritage. The Regional Municipal Cultural Forums (2003-4) is a partnership between the University of Waterloo and the Association of Municipalities of Ontario.

2 <www.cariboo.bc.ca/smallcities/ResearchProgram>

ity was taking a leadership role in connecting up the community cultural organizations within a planning framework.³ Kamloops provides an interesting example of the smaller municipality putting key investments into arts, culture and heritage, supported by a three-year community/university research program undertaken to examine the emerging role for culture in small cities.

3 *Kamloops Daily News*, March 10, 2004.

Chasing the Magic Bullet

As each municipality chases down possible federal and provincial sources of revenue and leverages local assets to find their “magic bullet,” it is important to look at the local leadership networks and how culture can become more fully integrated with these systems. Successful cultural projects have found innovative ways to link up the business sector with community needs for culture.

Municipal political leadership and staff play a key role in interest intermediation between community organizations, the business sector and educational leadership. The “Five Pillar” model continues to be an important analytical tool when looking at local case examples for municipal cultural development and how to best invest in culture at the local level. *MW*

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