

Developing and Revitalizing Rural Communities Through Arts and Culture

Summary Overview

Introduction

Rural regions are in a time of transition. Challenges for rural communities in Canada and abroad include declining and aging populations, problems with youth retention, limited economic and social opportunities for residents, depleting natural resources, loss of local services, and higher costs of living. The agricultural futures of rural communities are also in question: Policy and industry changes in agriculture have added uncertainty and concern for the future of the “family farm,” with added stressors from environmental damage linked to climate change.

As rural communities re-envision and reposition themselves, they are seeking to revitalize, diversify their economic base, enhance their quality of life, and reinvent themselves for new functions and roles. A new cooperative regionalism is emerging in tandem with a growing recognition that each community should have a clear sense of self, bolstered by residents’ desire to regain a community-based self-determination. In the midst of transition, many communities are recognizing that the ways the community understands itself, celebrates itself, and expresses itself are major contributing factors to its ability to withstand economic, political, and cultural winds of change and transition. Arts, culture, and heritage are viewed not only as amenities to improve the quality of life, but as a foundation upon which the future of these rural/small communities rests. The arts and creative activities can profoundly affect the ability of a town not only to survive over time, but to thrive.

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The **Developing and Revitalizing Rural Communities Through Arts and Creativity** project consisted of an international English-language literature review and resource compilation, framed by considerations of “small/rural communities,” “arts,” and “creative activity.” The purpose was to review and assess the state of research and to highlight dominant themes in the literature, both academic and policy-related research/studies. The project was guided by four framing questions:

- a. What are the opportunities for and barriers to the sustainable development of creative/cultural businesses in rural regions?
- b. Are there critical ingredients or common themes necessary to build long-term vitality for the arts in rural communities?
- c. What “good practice” projects/programs/partnerships/strategies are working in rural or remote regions?
- d. What research exists?

The project was commissioned by the Creative City Network of Canada, with financial support provided by the Department of Canadian Heritage and Rural Alberta’s Development Fund through the Alberta Recreation and Parks Association (as part of the Alberta Active/Creative Communities Initiative).

The research was directed by Dr. Nancy Duxbury and Heather Campbell at the Centre for Policy Studies on Culture and Communities at Simon Fraser University, Vancouver, with insightful contributions from three international collaborators:

- Australia – Kim Dunphy, Program Manager, Cultural Development Network, Melbourne
- United States – Dr. Patrick Overton, Director, Front Porch Institute, Oregon
- Europe – Dr. Lidia Varbanova, Laboratory for European Cultural Cooperation, Amsterdam; and the Centre for Intercultural and Social Development, Montréal

The final project consists of four papers with accompanying project and community case studies/ examples, and a combined annotated bibliography. All papers are available in electronic form on the Creative City Network of Canada website: www.creativecity.ca

This summary overview highlights the common themes emerging around cultural development in rural areas across the four project papers, and reoccurring critical ingredients to foster vibrant arts activity in rural and small communities. Abstracts of the four papers are presented in Annex A.

Definitions

Defining rural. Definitions of *rural* vary, based on a variety of characteristics from population size, population density, distance, access to services, etc. In general, small rural communities are conceived as having populations of less than 10,000 and somewhat separate from larger centres. However, increasingly cities are invading nearby rural areas making it more and more difficult to make a clear distinction between *urban* and *rural*, and contributing to the pressures of community transition in these areas.

Defining arts and creative activity. The study considered arts activities in all disciplines and spanning amateur, semi-professional, and professional aspects. This encompassed both indigenously created activity and touring and other external influences on local activity. Creative businesses and entrepreneurial creators were also considered, mainly in the context of economic diversification, but also in reference to attracting new residents to rural communities.

Common research themes and critical ingredients

The project papers collectively constitute a broad-stroke, initial mapping of the research terrain on the topic of cultural development in small/rural communities. Overall, there is no comprehensive “whole” to the research literature, which incorporates a wide range of disciplines and approaches. As well, as highlighted in the international papers, this rural development (and the associated research) has different cultural contexts, local traditions, and historical developments that inform and flavour cultural development policy structures and strategies in play in each region.

While the extent of cultural/creative work occurring in rural communities tends to be undercounted, under-recognized, and often undervalued, this may be gradually changing. Two major perspectives are evident: **community cultural development** (emphasizing social roles) and **economic development** (from the economic impacts of festivals to attracting and fostering creative businesses). The growing recognition of artists, creators, and entrepreneurial creative businesses as potential residents and

businesses in rural areas seeking to diversify their economic base offers a widening path to re-think the contributions of arts and creative activities to these communities.

■ **The nature of arts and creative activities in rural communities**

The interaction or tension among cultural heritage, contemporary art, and collective memory informs and influences the nature of arts activity in rural communities. **Rural arts activities** are described as holistic, drawing in people from many walks of life, and associated with individual and collective capacity building, empowerment, collaboration, expanded networking opportunities, and transformation. *Rural arts or participatory arts* are seen as a means of inspiring and activating community self-determination. Parallel with this, “art as process and citizen as participant” is emphasized over “art as product and citizen as patron” (Overton).

Maintaining a **balance between local activity and outside influences** is also important, nourishing local creators and ideas and providing a wider range of cultural opportunities in communities. Touring activities in rural communities are associated with community development, and community-driven projects and organizations. The importance of local involvement and control over “imported activities” is key, as is the capacity building potential of grassroots-based regional networks.

Rural festivals encompass a variety of cultural practices and activities. They are events in which rural identities are reproduced and maintained, and can serve as a means of fostering collective identity and a sense of belonging. Over time, they can characterize and enhance a broadly defined cultural expression of place. Although both the community-building and economic benefits of festivals have become increasingly recognized in many rural communities, a disconnect or “policy invisibility” within community planning contexts can also be observed.

The broader context for rural cultural activities is the availability and capabilities of **broadband internet**, which is particularly highlighted by rural communities’ growing desire to attract the “creative class” as residents-with-businesses; growing cultural sharing practices, especially among youth; and the centrality of the internet as a marketing tool. The need for connection – to others, to markets, to sources of inspiration and trends, to broadcast oneself outward – is a reoccurring theme.

■ **Capacity and related challenges**

Arts activity in rural communities is challenged by a number of factors. Overall, community resources, both monetary and human, are limited, and are faced with pressures of survival and transition as well as a changing population. Within the community, the arts may not have a prominent status or widespread appreciation, and rural practitioners may also feel they are overlooked by city-centric funding approaches and gatekeepers. Thus, organizations typically operate with limited capacity and resources, and face multiple challenges on volunteerism, the core of community-based arts and cultural organizations. In general, the number of volunteers contributing in rural/small communities is declining, while the average age of those who are volunteering is increasing. In addition, volunteers are often expected to complete tasks that are beyond their expertise and demand excessive time commitments, which adds further pressure on residents’ willingness to volunteer their time and skills. Opportunities for capacity building and skills development are limited.

■ Community factors and critical ingredients

The continuum of creative development within communities has been traced in several studies, with the goal of developing a resource or tool specific to small, rural communities and culture-led regeneration. Key ingredients were identified and compiled to outline the progression of artistic development from *emerging* to *sustaining* to *mature* (Shifferd, 2005).

Reoccurring ingredients highlighted include:

- 1) **An underlying appreciation and attitude of acceptance** toward local culture, history, people and assets, and a community's "sense of place";
- 2) **A valuing of the arts in everyday life**, and an inclusive encouragement of **broad-based participation**;
- 3) **Key leadership roles** representing the broad community, and a **community-based coalition** willing to work towards a common goal;
- 4) **Social networks of key volunteers and arts supporters** who work on exhibitions, festivals, community cultural development projects; support artists in their community-regeneration efforts; and inclusively encourage cultural vibrancy among all cultural groups in a community; and
- 5) **Cultural infrastructure development** – Cultural facilities and centres are essential "gathering places," functioning as a cornerstone of community cohesion and community building. Support for this infrastructure, either as part of new developments or as maintenance of existing facilities, is essential to create a visible focus of efforts and to offer a physical point of contact for diverse community groups.

■ Population-related issues and opportunities

Population retention and attraction is a prevailing concern of small/rural communities, often tightly coupled with economic diversification exigencies. In this review, three population groups were highlighted: (1) youth, (2) artists and creative entrepreneurs, and (3) urban-to-rural migrants.

Youth engagement and retention, as part of revitalization efforts, is addressed widely with few sure answers and many as yet unevaluated efforts and strategies. The role of youth is increasingly coupled with ideas of the "creative economy" and the possibility of increased jobs in these industries. Population retention efforts include skill-building programs to support a workforce capable of attracting these industries and conversely allowing youth to remain in their own community in lieu of moving for either education or employment reasons.

The more traditional methods of including youth engagement in arts programming relate to providing cultural and creative recreational opportunities for local youth, as something separate from providing career or entrepreneurial opportunities. As recreationally focused activities, cultural engagement has been positioned to encourage social development and inclusion, develop leadership skills and volunteering experience, or build community ties through heritage and history explorations.

While these social and community-focused aspects of meaningful cultural engagement are still very important, emerging recommendations and initiatives indicate that these traditional views on the contributions of arts activities are diversifying to include the development of cultural/creative employment and enterprises. However, a disconnect still exists between research studies of youth

out-migration and the growth of creative industries in regional areas. Population retention strategies could benefit from this connection.

With a growing emphasis on entrepreneurship and small businesses, a desire to **attract the “creative class”** to rural communities can be observed. Factors that attract artists in significant numbers to Canadian towns and villages include: access to urban markets, local sources of employment (e.g., part-time jobs), agglomeration economies enabled by a local organizational catalyst (e.g., a university) or the overall size of the community-region, an appealing landscape, and the existence of *in situ* aboriginal artistic concentrations (Bunting & Mitchell, 2001). More recently, the availability of broadband internet access is also a key enabling factor. Conversely, artists also move to smaller communities and rural areas as they flee the high rents of urban centres and seek a rural/small community “quality of life.” Artists and creative entrepreneurs located in rural areas tend to be older, have established businesses and markets, and often take leadership roles in community initiatives. Over time, some communities become artist havens and/or arts destinations for tourists.

Urban-to-rural migrations (*counter-urbanism*) also play out on a broader societal basis, as a relatively wealthy middle-class group withdraws from urban settings to pursue a different lifestyle in a rural location, fueled by rising urban housing costs, quality of life concerns, and life transitions such as starting families or retirement. This trend underlies community reinventions as well as processes of rural gentrification. In some cases, urban workers relocate their residences in rural/small towns within commuting distance to larger urban centres while continuing to work in the city. This situation raises questions as to the degree to which these residents are truly engaged in the life and issues of these communities.

The key issue for communities is how to change, move forward, be open to, and maximize the opportunities made possible through the transition influences, while finding ways to retain the essence of who they are as a community.

■ Economic issues and opportunities

In numerous reports, the arts and creative industries are positioned as strategic economic sectors in rural communities, as significant contributors to regional and rural economies, as stimulants to broader economic revitalization, and as tourism-based opportunities. Attention to arts and creative activity has been bolstered recently in two ways: (1) rising attention to entrepreneurial, creative enterprises in the context of economic diversification, and (2) growing markets in cultural and rural tourism.

Cultural tourism, anchored by heritage or special events and festivals, can become an economic mainstay for a rural community. The importance of obtaining a balance between tourism and the overall needs of the local community was strongly emphasized. While some cultural tourism trajectories emerge as an organic formalization of plans and initiatives from the community, other initiatives appear to be more top-down. In both cases, there are strong warnings concerning the over-dominance of tourism imperatives in community decisions and plans, as well as the **potential threat of over-commercialization or -commodification** in the service of cultural tourism – and perhaps fueled by rural gentrification. This “creative destruction” may change a community so that it loses part of the charm that made it interesting and unique in the first place.

Some researchers warn of the potential of introducing inappropriate frameworks to rural-based cultural initiatives, and question the idea of transferring “urban-centric” creative economy policies and practices to rural locations. Cautions in exclusively using an economic development frame for cultural

development are also evident – some worthy and important arts activities do not “fit” within an economic development frame.

Overall, the interconnected world of creative production is more complicated than the image of a simple “city–country divide” and should focus on **networks and flows** of people, information, and creative production. Inter-regional networks can support creative producers to lever opportunities, to seek wider markets, and to open up access in key industries. Inter-community rural networks focusing on arts and culture offer a systematic and synergetic approach to revitalization efforts and overcoming isolation and distance. In these contexts, the role of **incubators and nodes** in scattered networks of cultural producers is vital, allowing for finer-grained, intensely networked creative communities.

■ Governance factors

Governance strategies for arts and culture in a rural context are situated within both (a) broader arts and cultural policies and (b) rural strategic policy initiatives and/or agricultural policy. A key concern found across the studies is the applicability of urban approaches to rural settings considering the unique challenges specific to location.

Numerous studies include recommendations for governance of cultural development in rural communities, with six reoccurring categories dominant:

- 1) **Community buy-in and integration**, including the necessity of government commitment at all levels;
- 2) **Engaging youth**, with a focus on capacity and retention through employment, recreational, and educational initiatives;
- 3) **Leadership development**, with the goal of developing roles of energizer, broker, coach, and champion to initiate local entrepreneurship and investment;
- 4) **Increased funding support** with the goals of achieving sustainable, whole-community development and a reduction of bureaucratic obstacles and a increase in community-driven and controlled funding initiatives;
- 5) **Education and partnerships**, related to building whole-community solutions with partnerships between non-profit and for-profit organizations, and the necessity of training, engaging, and maintaining volunteer bases; and
- 6) The need for **policy implementation and further study** with the support of government and other funding bodies.

The question of “**right timing**” is also an important aspect of discussions of governance as often there needs to be an accurate reading of a community’s resources, capacity, and assets before a plan of revitalization can be fully acted upon. The role of governance in this situation must be community driven to preserve a bottom-up, sustainable program of culture-led regeneration. Regional art officers and networks of support may be key to these efforts.

Recommendations for future research

To improve local strategic planning and action:

- Conduct community self-assessments using the Minnesota model
- Examine organizational development and capacity building needs and issues, including state of volunteerism
- Review and assess the (public) policy-funding framework available to support arts activity, organizations, and creative businesses in rural communities (local, provincial, federal governments; foundations; other)
- Review First Nations cultural practices and contemporary development priorities
- Review and adapt selected international studies/surveys for the Canadian or Alberta context (e.g., U.K. creative business surveys, Regional Arts Australia regional/rural consultations)

To improve the knowledge base:

- Contemporary situation I: Document the presence and distribution of artists in rural communities (2006 census), analyze changes since 2001 census, and identify gaps in knowledge
- Contemporary situation II: Conduct community asset mapping and regional analyses (e.g., facilities, organizational infrastructure, networks)
- Contemporary situation III: Survey rurally located artists and creative entrepreneurs regarding their reasons for locating in a rural area and challenges they face
- Historical contexts: Review and compile Canadian historical traditions of arts in rural communities –on a community basis and “rural” more generally (e.g., crafts, arts traditions in rural areas, NFB activities, cowboy poetry, etc.)
- Conduct a French-language literature review, and translate into English

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The project was conducted by the Centre for Policy Studies on Culture and Communities at Simon Fraser University, Vancouver, British Columbia.

The project papers are available on the Creative City Network of Canada website: www.creativecity.ca

Annex A. Abstracts

Developing and Revitalizing Rural Communities Through Arts and Creativity:

A LITERATURE REVIEW

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This paper provides an overview of English-language academic research literature and policy-related studies with respect to cultural development in rural communities. The paper is organized into four sections:

1. **The nature of arts and cultural activity in rural communities**, which discusses four key themes in the literature: (1) the nature of arts activity in rural communities; (2) festivals as community-building practices; (3) touring activity; and (4) the role of information and computer technologies. Aboriginal/First Nations cultural practices are also noted.
2. **The community context for the arts development and vitality**, which considers: (1) critical ingredients for building arts-active communities, (2) the potential for creative destruction, and (3) community reinvention using the arts.
3. **The role of the arts in economic diversification and revitalization**, which outlines: (1) two informing conceptual frames – regional (or rural) development platforms, and an economic perspective on cultural resources, and (2) key themes and cautions regarding economic development roles for the arts in rural communities.
4. **Governance strategies and initiatives**, which outlines some of the reoccurring themes among policy efforts and recommendations to support and sustain rural cultural development.

A set of case study examples accompanies this paper to illustrate the variety of ways arts and cultural/creative development is being pursued in the revitalization of Canadian rural communities.

Developing and Revitalizing Rural Communities Through Arts and Creativity:

AUSTRALIA

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This paper explores the contribution of the arts and creativity to the development and revitalization of rural and remote communities in Australia. A search of the Australian literature indicates that arts and creative initiatives are significant for the development of rural and remote communities in the economic, environmental, social, and cultural domains. The “creative industry” model is particularly dominant in research investigating economic impacts of arts and creative initiatives, while a community cultural development approach is reflected in literature and activity that seeks or values social outcomes, including health and well being, social inclusion, and educational achievements. Also examined are arguments that ascribe value to the cultural dimension in its own right, in which the intrinsic value of arts and creativity for rural and remote communities is recognized. This view leads to the consideration that the economy should support arts and creativity rather than the other way around.

Factors that seem pivotal in building long-term sustainability for arts and creativity in rural communities include:

- Appreciation of local culture, history and heritage, local people, assets and characteristics;
- Enthusiastic local leadership, positive attitudes, local entrepreneurship and investment; and
- Right timing and a focus on retaining young people through employment, recreational, and educational initiatives.

The research examined for this paper points to numerous factors that might support initiatives in other communities. The most fundamental of these is the necessity of government commitment (at all levels) to the value of cultural dimension in planning and public policy. Other factors include the need for recognition of the value of local cultural product and practices, more support for arts in communities, especially through networks of regional arts development officers and assistance for volunteers (including training), and reduction of bureaucratic obstacles. Also suggested are better funding programs, including long-term investment and less onerous application processes, as well as data collection about arts activities and outcomes at a local level.

Developing and Revitalizing Rural Communities Through Arts and Creativity:

UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

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Most work in the area of creative economies and cultural development focuses on large metropolitan areas. Yet, in the United States, thousands of rural/small communities (populations 25,000 or less) face many of these same issues without having the human and financial capital resources these large population centers have more readily available to them to find and implement solutions. The National Trust of Historic Places estimates that over 80% of the national landscape of the United States is rural. While this represents a large majority of the actual land space of the United States, the way in which people understand this space as being rural or small is varied. For these purposes, whenever the term *rural* is used in this paper, it will be accompanied by the term *small (rural/small)*, providing a wider definition that is not limited just to population density or geographical location but also the nature of the community as well.

Over the past 25 years, many rural/small communities have faced the loss of traditional economic resources they have counted on for decades. To complicate matters, this economic loss has been unexpectedly combined with a dramatic influx of new citizens in many rural communities, especially those within one or two hours of large metropolitan/urban communities, resulting in rising property taxes, and increased demand for social services. All of these challenges are threatening to destroy the cultural infrastructure and “sense of place” that has historically defined these communities. Many of the citizens who live in rural/small communities find themselves at a crossroads and many are unsure just what direction to take. While this can be viewed as a “problem to be solved,” it also creates a parallel “opportunity to maximize potential good” that might come from this transition. But whatever approach is taken, the core, central word that must be understood in describing rural/small communities is *transition*.

This research paper provides a wide-lens view of the changing cultural landscape of America’s rural/small communities in the twenty-first century in five sections. Section 1 provides a broad overview the contemporary cultural context of rural/small communities in the United States. It includes a short historical background of the relationship between arts and culture in rural/small communities; a brief overview of the contemporary, twenty-first century overview of community cultural development in rural/small communities; the emergence and impact of public funding for community cultural development in rural/small communities; and, finally, the challenge and opportunity of rural/small community transition. Section 2 addresses overarching issues facing rural/small communities in the United States focusing on the relationship between *Sense of Place* and *Poetry of Place* and the emergence of a new localism and a new regionalism in rural/small communities. Section 3 addresses the various ways in which community cultural development and concepts related to creative economies translate into the rural/small community context. Section 4 provides a short summary conclusion. Finally, Section 5 (Annex A) cites numerous examples of rural/small community arts and cultural development projects as well as significant public/private partnerships, offering a glimpse into the diversity of ways in some communities are responding to the opportunity in front of them.

Developing and Revitalizing Rural Communities Through Arts and Creativity:

EUROPE

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Culture and art are an integral part of local development. From a social perspective, they are an essential component in the quality of life, as the more choices people have to participate in cultural and artistic events, the higher they rate their personal satisfaction. From an economic perspective, the development of the cultural sector in a rural area contributes to creating more jobs. It also has an impact on increasing revenues as a result of selling goods and services, or enhancing cultural tourism activities in rural areas.

This paper addresses issues of rural revitalization from the context of arts and culture in Europe. The concept of “culture-led regeneration” was first mentioned in the 1990s, and is driven by the objective to expand the depth and breadth of cultural life in the local communities through:

- Creating innovative, enjoyable, and high-quality arts experiences;
- Introducing new dynamics and encouraging creative solutions to problems;
- Engaging diverse communities;
- Nurturing and developing diverse art forms;
- Cultivating a wide range of artistic, human, and financial resources; and
- Developing an awareness of the social, critical, and practical functions of art-making.

As a result of the rapid economic development in Europe, cities are invading rural areas, making it more and more difficult to make a clear distinction between *urban* and *rural*. This is especially applicable to smaller and urbanised countries. EU member states often devise their own interpretation of the term *rural*.

Key factors in successful projects include a sensitivity to the nature of arts activity in rural areas, including the interaction between cultural heritage, contemporary art, and collective memory. In many rural communities there is not a clear distinction between *art* and *craft*. Many communities also face the choice between preserving traditional or classical forms of arts and culture, or exploring contemporary methods while incorporating their own unique expression.

Key issues and policy positions discussed in this paper include:

- Arts practices and social integration of immigrants in rural areas, along with a discussion of the Roma and other minorities;
- Connecting isolated communities through arts and culture and through a systemic and synergetic approach in revitalization efforts, including all partners involved;
- Artistic practices and social development of youth in rural areas;
- Revitalization of the numerous cultural and community centres (which were very active during the past socialist regime), spread in rural areas in many transition countries in Central and Eastern Europe; and

- Economic issues, including new funding initiatives of foundations in rural areas, the development of rural cultural tourism, the privatization of cultural institutions, and the role of the European Capital of Culture concept as a method of investing in cultural infrastructure.