

TRANSFORMING COMMUNITIES THROUGH CULTURAL PLANNING
Presentation to Creative City Conference
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Good afternoon. I'm very pleased to be here speaking with you today and want to thank Elena Bird for the invitation to come and share my experiences of almost three decades of transforming my community, the City of Toronto, through Cultural Planning.

Today, I want to tell you about how cultural planning transformed not only the cultural landscape of Toronto, but also how the cultural planning done in Toronto in the early eighties set the stage for similar work throughout Canada and elsewhere.

Around the globe, municipalities have found that cultural planning is central to city and community building, that it lays the ground for healthy neighborhoods and vibrant economies, that it can be the roadmap that connects diverse cultures and transforms our civic society.

It was not always so.

Back in the early eighties when I started my career as an arts activist at the Toronto Arts Council, the arts in our city and, indeed, pretty much everywhere else, were seen as a "nice to have," IF we can afford them.

There was certainly no understanding of the connection between a city's creativity and its social and economic well-being.

How did that all change?

It changed largely because of a combination of cultural planning and cultural activism starting in the mid- and late-eighties.

I once argued that a good Culture Plan shares many similarities with a work of art and, to continue my analogy, with an iceberg. The part most see and focus on is the relatively small tip gloriously visible above the waterline glinting in the sunlight. But, in fact, the bulk and power lie beneath the surface, in the dark.

It takes time to create it, often in very difficult circumstances. Certainly when I created my first culture plan in 1985 it never occurred to me that cultural planning would become so au courant, so much a part of the zeitgeist that there would be conferences about culture plans.

What I'm trying to say, creatively of course, is that the process is key ... that stumbling around in the dark sometimes is inevitable ... and that dogged perseverance is required. But exhilarating it is!

Looking back, when I first started working in the cultural bureaucracy, with the TAC one of my key strengths was that I didn't know what I didn't know and therefore I assumed that a lot could be done. And a lot needed doing! Our budget was tiny and we depended mostly on volunteers.

Coming from the theatre I knew how necessary it was to have a strong text as a starting point – a blueprint upon which the production is built. “If it ain't on the page, it ain't on the stage.” We needed words: a report, a manifesto, an analysis, a flag to rally the troops ... a plan.

And then we got very lucky because a real writer, in fact a playwright, Tom Hendry, came on board. This began a wonderful, fortuitous collaboration between Tom and me that eventually resulted in a report entitled Cultural Capital.

What we embarked on was, we were to discover, utterly unique at the time: to map the economic and employment landscape of the arts in Toronto.

In our research over the next year-and-a-half, we found out that there was not a single municipality anywhere we could find who had ever mapped their cultural economy.

Tom was a vital part of the cultural community, having been not only a playwright but a theatre wright who had co-founded several theatres, like the MTC and TFT. When we started on our extensive soundings of the cultural community Tom had the great gift for getting at the kernel of an idea. And he knew how to build an organization.

Cultural Capital, when it came out in 1984, was a pioneering and seminal work – the first municipal look in Canada at what investment in a city’s cultural life translated to in jobs and economic impacts. In other words not treating culture as a charity case, an expense, but as an investment that paid surprising dividends.

The report advocated a dedicated tax for the arts – a hotel tax to fund and promote the arts. It took 20 years to get a hotel tax but so far it’s only for promotion. We spoke of the need for one stop shopping for the film industry – that’s been copied by many other jurisdictions. We developed a benchmark based on per capita culture funding so that comparisons could be made between different municipalities. This proved very effective and the TAC budget in 6 years went up by 2400 %.

We also identified that the 2 big problems facing the cultural community were working capital and working space. Out of this we set up Artscape, which has become a wonderful, effective and creative organization. As well, we advocated for a loosening of the very strict

municipal zoning rules that would allow for live/work spaces. The results can now be seen in the various warehouse districts filled with creative workers.

Really to anyone who had been paying attention to how city neighborhoods evolve over time it was strikingly obvious how culture workers created economic value into any area they moved into to live and work. In fact I still remember a sharp edged graffiti statement from the mid-eighties “Artists are the storm troopers of gentrification”.

But, the fact is that if artists did the heavy lifting when it came to turning around a neighborhood ... they were rarely able to participate in the economic rewards they created, as they could rarely afford to own a piece of the rock, they alchemically transformed from lead to gold.

They had all the creative capital and none of the economic capital. Cultural Capital and my other cultural planning reports for Toronto were an effort to redress that balance and we have gone quite a distance in doing that.

I think one of the key process decisions that led to many successful outcomes was breaking everything up into small steps and specific, do-able actions. A broad vision, however exciting, has to be concretized into practical, achievable goals that you can aim at on a daily, weekly and monthly basis.

So you have to chop your iceberg into manageable chunks that can be portaged over inhospitable terrain and then be re-assembled into a seaworthy craft.

Dogged perseverance is a part of the job description and you have to keep your eye on the prize, even as they keep moving the goal posts.

Interestingly, a surprising setback we encountered was resistance among some artists who were uncomfortable both ideologically and practically with our economic arguments.

A part of that debate – art for art’s sake - is legitimately still with us, although the practical argument that culture was not playing to its innate strengths by exploring the economic case has proven to be wrong, as evidenced by this conference.

The logical and organic development of our ideas was to ultimately start thinking of the whole city as a neighborhood that could undergo the alchemy of becoming a cultural hot zone, where everyone would want to live and work, creating economic value through having a better idea rather than a stronger back.

I believe that throughout all my cultural planning experiences my gut instincts were helpful as well as the willingness to respect instinct that comes from working in the arts.

My point is that to achieve the sort of transformation I'm talking about, cultural planning must be yes, systematic, rigorous and full of useful data. That goes without saying.

But just as importantly, it must be creative, bold and imaginative, showing a vision for not just what is, but for what can be.

As I've said, the process is almost as important – if not more so- than the Plan itself.

So that when we came across, the then largely unheard, voice of Richard Florida, we knew that his research was hugely important. Or when I read about Manchester, the phrase 'creative city' jumped out as a metaphor for what our goal could be here in Toronto.

I must say, in passing, that the ability to mediate between the artistic world and the bureaucratic one is absolutely essential when creating a Culture Plan. You must be a skilled interpreter between these two realities, as you pilot your iceberg forward. Having set out the vision you must now deliver on it and often you feel that the fog is thick and the perils numerous.

But it is all worth it. At Toronto's city hall there is now the beginning of a paradigm shift as we begin to see that creativity and culture need to be at the centre of the city building strategy – (kind of where the heart is.)

Setting spending targets was an important component in our success in increasing cultural spending in Toronto and I continued this strategy over the next two decades.

Cultural Capital set our first spending targets in Toronto. In my next culture plan, the 1993 *Culture Plan for the Creative City* we revised the target upwards to a \$25 per capita goal.

And in my final culture plan for the City of Toronto, *Creative Capital Gains* that target was reconfirmed.

Today, the City of Toronto is within a hair's breadth of reaching that goal with spending at about \$23 per capita.

And, there's a plan that has been approved by Council to get to \$25 per capita of spending by 2017.

That's sounds like a long way off, but as you know, with the bureaucratic two-step : one step forward, two steps back cha-cha-cha, when you have an approved plan, you do eventually get there.

By putting engagement with the arts community at the heart of the process, *Cultural Capital* woke up that community to its political and cultural strengths.

That process of engagement also showed me that listening to the community was the most important part of my job. And that led to another culture plan called *Cultural Equity*.

This 1992 report was used as a model throughout the country for funding agencies seeking to become more inclusive of diverse cultures and cultural practices.

Like *Cultural Capital*, the success of the *Cultural Equity* report lay with its community engagement process. When I first heard at a meeting that TAC was not considered to be inclusive, I have to admit, my back went up.

But then I started listening and with the help of the amazing dub poet and strategist, Lillian Allen, we started a two-year journey of listening, listening and then listening some more.

The result was a report that called for a transformation not only in our programs but in our board and committee make up.

And, once again, we went to City Hall with our new friends to make the case for more money. These were individuals and groups who had never received funding from us. The budget wouldn't easily stretch to include them. I remember being in a meeting with a reggae musician who said to Mayor Art Eggleton, "I didn't know I was an artist until I met Ms Davies. I thought that was just for ballet dancers."

And we did get more funding.

And that allowed us to set up powerful programs like Fresh Arts.

Fresh Arts was a program aimed at youth from diverse and socially or economically challenged communities.

A huge success, Fresh Arts served as a model for other youth organizations in Toronto and spawned a number of massive musical talents that have made a mark on our cultural world, especially in the R & B and Rap music scene.

Motion, Jully Black, Kardinall Ofishall, video director L'il X, and many other formerly marginalized youth are now leaders in the mainstream.

Through the cultural planning process, we found a way to bring the artists and the politicians together in an open conversation that they both had a stake in.

I'm pleased to tell you that the seeds of cultural advocacy, planted by us in the early eighties, have blossomed.

A great example of this is the work done in Toronto in the last few years by a group of young artists who banded together under the name Beautifulcity.ca

As I mentioned, in 2003 I developed the Culture Plan for the Creative City. One of its recommendations was to establish creative funding tools to help fund the arts. One of these was a billboard tax.

This was our second attempt at a dedicated tax for the arts. We only partly succeeded with the Hotel Tax and this time, with the billboard tax, we put a big push on.

When I say, “we” I mean the whole community. The idea of a billboard tax to fund the arts was picked up by a collection of passionate young artists who banded together under the name Beautiful City.ca.

Thanks to their advocacy around this recommendation, the City approved a tax on billboards a number of years ago.

They reminded politicians of their long-standing promises to get Toronto to \$25 dollars per capita of funding for the arts. They launched an amazing campaign. They brought together a coalition from uptown and downtown and ignited the imaginations of Councillors in wards across the breadth of the City.

They are organized, smart, make political friends across all ideologies and in the civil service.

The result: \$6m in additional city funding to the arts and culture in 2013. Even more amazing, Mayor Rob Ford spoke and voted in favour of this increase.

Today total cultural spending in Toronto is \$58 million - \$28 million of that goes in grants. That’s a long way from the spending in 1985!

So, what have I learned over the years about cultural planning?

First of all, listen to your instincts.

Secondly, listen to your artists and put them front and centre – they should lead the way.

Shoot for the moon. Vision is key. But at the same time, break everything down into do-able steps.

Set funding targets that work for your community. If you don't there's no target to shoot for and rally around.

Persevere and don't let set backs get you down. We overestimate what can be accomplished in the short term and underestimate what can be accomplished in the long term.

Do your homework, be rigorous in collecting data and research. Make sure you have sound policies and strategies that are grounded in your municipality's governance framework. The billboard tax started as a policy that we worked for 10 years to put into practice.

Make political allies, lots of them.

Always root your plan in your community and make your it as creative as the community it's describing.

Because creativity will forever be the spark that ignites our souls, unleashes our dreams and is the catalyst that can bring community, culture and politics together.

Thank you.