

Revitalizing Rural Communities Through Arts and Culture

Rural regions—in Canada and around the world—are facing a time of transition. As rural communities re-envision and reposition themselves, they seek to diversify their economic base and enhance quality of life. This has created a fresh, though often stressful, climate of reinvention in which new functions and roles are being sought, and in which arts and culture are key.

It is well known that rural communities today face many challenges, such as declining and aging populations, youth retention, limited economic and social opportunities, depleting natural resources, loss of local services, and higher costs of living. Policy and industry changes in agriculture, as well as environmental damage linked to climate change, add concern over the future of the “family farm.”

In the midst of transition, the ways the community understands, celebrates, and expresses itself are major contributing factors to its ability to withstand the economic, political, and cultural winds of change. Arts, culture, and heritage are not only amenities to improve quality of life, but are a foundation upon which the future of rural and small communities rests. Arts and creative activities can profoundly affect the ability of a town not only to survive over time, but to thrive.

The extent of cultural and creative work in rural communities tends to be undercounted, under-recognized, and often undervalued, but this may be gradually changing. 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. Influencing this forward thinking is the knowledge that socially based views of the role of the arts in rural communities have diversified and are increasingly coupled with ideas of “creative economy” opportunities.

For example, typical arts-involved projects for youth engagement highlight building social connections, self-esteem, and community knowledge. While such social and community-focused aspects of meaningful cultural engagement are crucial, emerging initiatives indicate that these traditional views on the

contributions of arts activities are broadening to include ideas about cultural/creative employment and enterprises.

The two perspectives of community cultural development (emphasizing social roles) and economic development (from the economic impacts of festivals to attracting and fostering creative businesses) are equally important and, in fact, are interdependent. The growing recognition of artists, creators, and entrepreneurial creative individuals as potential residents and business owners 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.

... rural arts are different from urban arts, but in unexpected ways. We often are predisposed to think that rural arts are smaller-scale versions of arts activities in larger towns and cities, or that they are not professional in a mainstream sense. But in fact rural arts have a richness and complexity congruent with anything seen in larger centres, and have distinct characteristics that arise precisely because these activities happen in particular rural or community settings.

— John Brotman, Ontario Arts Council, at a Canadian Cultural Observatory workshop

INSIDE

- Critical Considerations 2
- Towards Economic Diversity and Vigour 3
- Rural Solutions: Six Profiles 4
- Key Ingredients for Vital Communities 6
- What Makes the Arts Thrive? 6
- International Perspectives 7
- Twelve Strategies for Success 8

For more information and profiles of cultural projects making a difference in Canadian communities, visit creativecommons.ca

Critical Considerations:

Fostering Arts and Culture in Rural Communities

Arts activity in rural communities is challenged by a number of factors. Community resources, both monetary and human, tend to be limited, and communities 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 feel 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. The number of volunteers in rural and small communities is declining, while their average age 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.

Touring activities provide a wider range of cultural opportunities in small and rural communities, which can nourish local creators and introduce fresh ideas. Rural tours can significantly impact community development by opening up avenues for new community 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. Maintaining a **balance between local activity and outside influences** is crucial.

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. The community-building, place-branding, and economic benefits of festivals have become increasingly recognized in many rural communities despite frequent "policy invisibility" within community planning contexts.

Population retention and attraction is a prevailing concern of small and rural communities, often tightly coupled with economic diversification. Population retention efforts with regards to youth include skill-building programs to support a workforce capable of attracting creative industries and conversely allowing youth to remain in their own community in lieu of moving for either education or employment reasons.

With a growing emphasis on entrepreneurship and small businesses, a desire to **attract the "creative class"** to rural communities is evident. 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 a local aboriginal artistic community.

More recently, the availability of

broadband Internet access is also key to attracting the "creative class" as residents-with-businesses. It enables the use of the Internet as a marketing tool and also for cultural sharing practices, especially among youth. The need for connection—to others, to markets, to sources of inspiration and trends—and to broadcast oneself outward are recurring themes.

Conversely, artists also move to smaller communities and rural areas as they flee the high rents of urban centres and seek a rural and 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 or small towns within commuting distance to larger urban centres while continuing to work in the city. This situation raises questions over the degree to which these residents are truly engaged in the life and issues of these communities.



Hydro kiosk box with Kirsten Guzek, a participant in the underground wiring painting project, Gibsons, BC. Photo courtesy of Greta Guzek

Rural touring is not a poor substitute for the kind of experience offered by urban arts venues. It is qualitatively different in several respects. The facilities may not be as good, but the intimacy of the space, the opportunity to meet the performers, the fact that most of the audience know each other — these give a village hall show a unique power. Indeed, they can make it a more challenging experience for the audience, who often come for reasons unconnected with an interest in the arts, and for the performers, who cannot expect people to be familiar with their work. Both artists and audiences consistently feel that such shows are exciting, memorable and have a quality that is distinctively valuable.

— François Matarasso, *Only Connect: Arts Touring and Rural Communities*, 2004

Towards Economic Diversity and Vigour



Amish buggy, Oxford County, ON. Photo courtesy of Tourism Oxford



Klondike Institute of Arts and Culture, Dawson City, YT. Photo courtesy of KIAC

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 through rising attention to entrepreneurial creative enterprises in the context of economic diversification, and through 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, but the importance of obtaining a balance between tourism and the overall needs of the local community is strongly emphasized. While some cultural tourism trajectories emerge as an organic formalization of plans

and initiatives from the community, others appear to be more top-down.

In both cases, serious concerns have been expressed regarding the over-dominance of tourism imperatives in community decisions and plans, in particular the **potential threat of over-commercialization or over-commodification** in the service of cultural tourism, 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 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 that can help overcome 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.

“We think of economy in terms of jobs, projects and things like that, but I think there’s a softer economy that involves people staying and building around where they want to be . . . All along I’ve been arguing that healthy arts and culture is a key to that.”

—Writer Rob Budde, Prince George, BC, quoted in *The Tyee*, Sept. 17, 2008

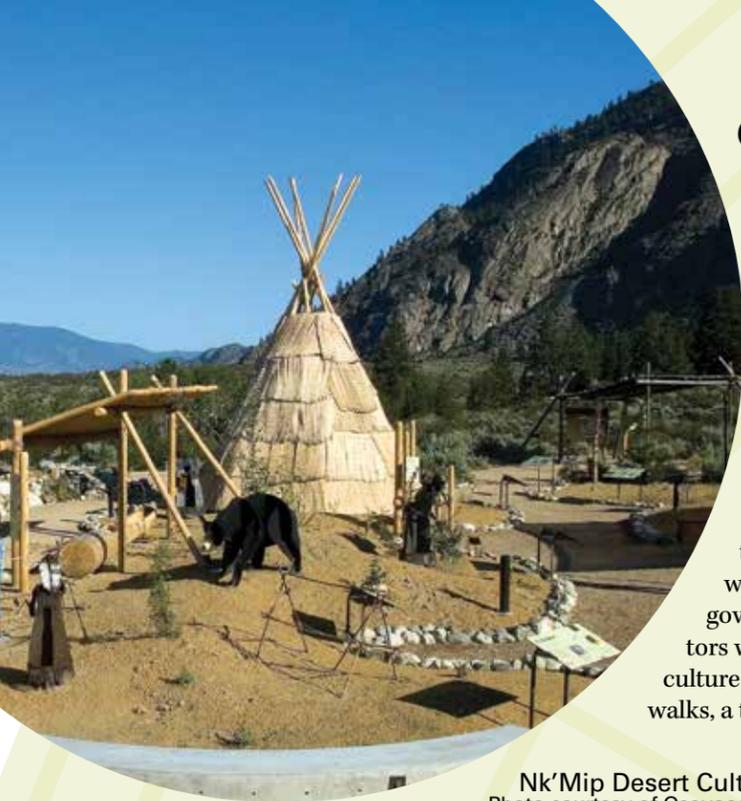
What is rural?

National research in Canada uses at least six definitions of rural, each emphasizing different criteria such as population size or density, distance, access to services, or labour market context. In *Definitions of “Rural,”* Statistics Canada recommends that a good starting point is the “rural and small town” definition: “the population living in towns and municipalities outside the commuting zone of larger urban centres (i.e., outside the commuting zone of centres with populations of 10,000 or more).”

Rural art is associated with capacity building, empowerment, collaboration, expanded networking opportunities, and individual and community transformation. A growing interest in **participatory arts**, roughly defined as the synthesis of community art and professional art, furthers the transformative potential of this activity.

What is arts and creative activity?

This includes arts activities in all disciplines, spanning amateur, community based, and professional aspects, as well as both indigenously created activity and touring and other external influences on local activity. Creative businesses and entrepreneurial creators should also be considered, mainly in the context of economic diversification, but also in reference to attracting new residents to rural communities.



Nk'Mip Desert Cultural Centre
Photo courtesy of Osoyoos Indian Band

Osoyoos, British Columbia

Population: 4,790

The Osoyoos Indian Band (also known as Nk'Mip, pronounced in-ka-meep) has 400+ members and a rich history in BC, where the Band was formed in 1877. After establishing a council to oversee their economic development in 1992, a number of exciting projects have been completed. These include a golf course, winery, resort and spa, and the highly successful Nk'Mip Desert Cultural Centre.

The Centre opened in June 2006 as part of the Nk'Mip Resort. Built at a cost of \$9 million, with most of the initial capital costs funded by government grants, the Centre provides visitors with an opportunity to experience Okanagan culture and the desert environment, featuring guided walks, a traditional Okanagan village, and desert

reptile programs. Facilities include the Pithouse Theatre, where a multi-sensory experience recreates life in a traditional winter home, and the Critter Corner, where desert creatures, including the endangered Western Rattlesnake, can be observed.

The Osoyoos Indian Band has responded to the need not only for economic self-reliance, but also for cultural and ecological preservation. Through leases and joint ventures, the community has built meaningful business relationships that have created social and employment opportunities for both natives and non-natives in the South Okanagan. The Band has received accolades from both the tourism industry and the Aboriginal community for its business acumen and its dedication to heritage and ecological preservation.
www.nkmipdesert.com

Rosebud, Alberta

Population: 100

For Rosebud, a rural community 100 km northeast of Calgary and 35 km southwest of Drumheller, one arts-based industry was enough to literally save the town: the Rosebud Theatre and Rosebud School of the Arts employs the entire population in one capacity or another, from teachers to technical staff to performers to the tourism industry.

European settlers began homesteading in Rosebud in 1883, laying the foundation for a strong farming and ranching community. By the early 1970s, however, the population dropped to less than 30. In 1973, music and art teacher LaVerne Erickson started Rosebud Camp of the Arts as a summer outreach program for Calgary youth, which led to the founding in 1977 of the Rosebud Fine Arts High School, combining academics, arts, and work experience. The school created an artistic hub in Rosebud, and further initiatives followed, including the

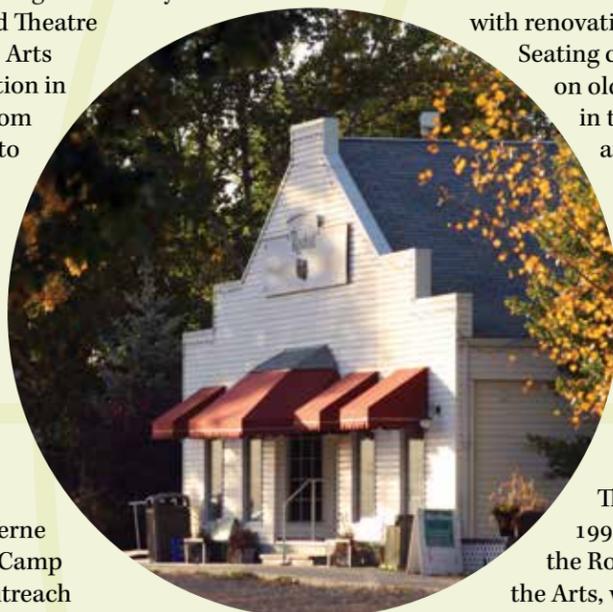
Rosebud School of the Arts, which focuses on post-secondary theatre, music, and creative arts ministry training, attracting students internationally.

The Rosebud Theatre expanded in the 1990s with renovations to the main Opera House.

Seating changed from "150 packed in on old church pews to 220 lounging in tiered theatre seats," a heating and air-conditioning system replaced the need to bring blankets in the winter and fans in the summer, actors were given a larger stage with a full dressing room, and patrons were treated to a lobby complete with washrooms, running water, and a concession area.

The thriving Chemainus Theatre Festival, opened in 1993, is a sister organization to the Rosebud Theatre and School of the Arts, who provided the Vancouver Island group with much of their first staff as well as their first two shows.

Rosebud is visited by 40,000+ people every year.
www.rosebudschoolofthearts.com
www.rosebudtheatre.com



Rosebud Opera House
Photo courtesy of Rosebud Theatre

Val Marie, Saskatchewan

Population: 140

Grasslands—Where Heaven Meets Earth, hosted by Val Marie, was a community-wide event presented through dance artists Bill Coleman's and Laurence Lemieux's *Off the Beaten Track* series. As part of the 2004 project, there were contemporary music and dance workshops in Val Marie and Shaunavon; kite-making in the schools, coordinated by the Art Gallery of Swift Current; the creation of banners by 12 southwest Saskatchewan visual artists; the recording of quilters' stories for an art exhibit in the Prairie Wind and Silver Sage Museum; and the construction of corral-style fencing along Val Marie's main street as a symbol of a community drawn together in farming life.

The dancers, the audience of about 600, and the landscape all had an equal role in the final interactive performance at Grasslands National Park. Afterwards, Robert Ducan, a business owner and former mayor of Val Marie, wrote a letter to the artists:

"... our business (The Convent Country Inn) has been constantly busy since the dance, which will make it the best business year in the last seven years. I spoke with the owner of the local grocery store, Whitemud Grocery, and their business has been much

busier than usual since the dance. We believe that it has somehow made people more community minded. The town itself, with the props that were left, is much more aesthetically pleasing and many of the local people have felt an intense pride in their village being picked for this event ... This may sound a bit off the wall, but something happened that has changed this town for the better..."

Since then, the *Off the Beaten Track* series has continued with other notable community-building productions, including *The Gros Morne Project: Feel the Earth Move* in Newfoundland's Gros Morne National Park.
www.colemanlemieux.com



Grasslands Dance Project with dancer Margie Gillis and project participants
Photo courtesy of Birdsong Communications and Common Weal Community Arts Inc.

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Files of Revitalization

Prince Edward County, Ontario

Population: 25,500

Prince Edward County (PEC) is a rural municipality midway between Toronto and Montreal. At the turn of the 21st century, a “creative economy” model took over from a resource and farming based economy. A formal cultural planning process in 2005 resulted in a municipal cultural plan, and creative industries are now a major part of population retention and attraction. A key strategy in PEC economic development is promoting the County as an “artistic haven,” which helps to attract other “creatives” and generate economic growth.

Among the results of the cultural plan was a \$20-30 million investment in downtown revitalization in Picton (population 3,000), with major condominium, commercial, and retail developments, a new boutique hotel

with a culinary and jazz bar, new housing, and waterfront development.

With the help of the community, Picton’s heritage Regent Theatre—a rare example of an Edwardian opera house—weathered a crisis in 2004, when the season was cancelled and permanent staff laid off after poor sales for a touring production. Citizens of Picton, who depended on the economic spin-offs generated by the theatre, such as dinners out and pre-show shopping, but did not themselves buy tickets, engaged in substantial discussion about the role of the venue and its responsiveness to local audiences. Stressing the need to provide programming not just for tourists, but for the local population, too, they rallied for fundraisers and enthusiastically voiced their support for this important centre for the arts in Prince Edward County.

www.pecounty.on.ca



Mt. Tabor Playhouse, Milford with Lori Farrington and Kyle Watson from the Marysburgh Mummers

Photo: Theresa Durning

Bouctouche, New Brunswick

Population: 2,380

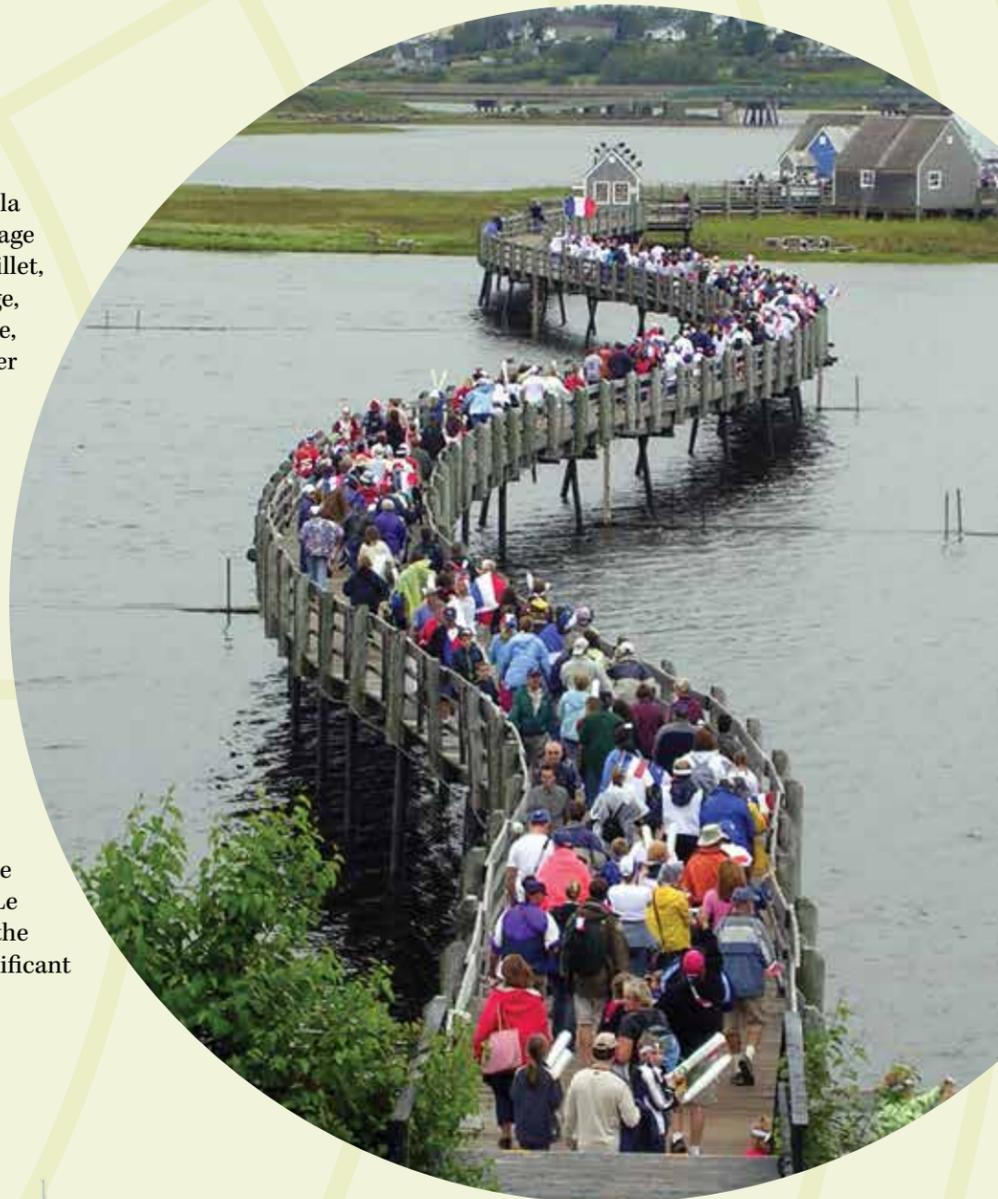
Located on a small island in Bouctouche, Le Pays de la Sagouine is a reproduction mid-century Acadian village inspired by the town’s famous novelist, Antonine Maillet, and her celebrated character, La Sagouine. The village, opened in 1992, features summer programs of theatre, music, comedy, and dance, including a popular dinner theatre with authentic Acadian cuisine.

Le Pays de la Sagouine was a municipally driven project, developed originally as a tourism initiative. However, the site has not only given an identity to the community, but has also provided a source of entertainment for local residents. It was in part because residents wanted to see new additions to the program that the facility began to hire several more actors.

Before Le Pays de la Sagouine was built, there were perhaps a handful of bed and breakfasts in the entire town; now there are dozens. Business owners who were initially concerned over the construction of a competing business area now credit the site for their increased success.

An economic impact study found that, as one of the most prominent tourist attractions in the province, Le Pays de la Sagouine has contributed significantly to the economic growth of the entire region, and other significant tourist attractions have also opened.

www.sagouine.com



Le Pays de la Sagouine
Photo courtesy of Le Pays de la Sagouine

Canning, Nova Scotia

Population: 2,760

The Ross Creek Centre for the Arts brings together the best in arts education for youth with community and professional artist programs. This research and development centre for the arts of all disciplines and cultures is proud to facilitate the development of new art from around the world in wonderful facilities on a picturesque farm in rural Nova Scotia.

On 186 acres of farm and forest overlooking the Bay of Fundy, the Centre offers programs and facilities for artists and students at varying levels of experience in the visual arts, performing arts, literary arts, architecture, film, and fine craft (jewellery, fabric, pottery, etc.). A program for aboriginal art, mainly Mi’kmaq, includes community and youth programs.



Ross Creek Centre for the Arts
Photo: Matt Jack

Ross Creek also has two performance spaces, two galleries, three visual arts studios, and an outdoor stage, and offers professional artist residencies at the Centre’s multi-disciplinary artist colony.

The Centre has been a boost to tourism, residents appreciate local access to high calibre art experiences, and Nova Scotia artists have important opportunities to return or remain at home rather than having to pursue careers elsewhere. “In the same way a scientist needs appropriate facilities in which to do their research, I would say that artists need that as well,” says co-founder Chris O’Neill.

www.artscentre.ca

Key Ingredients for Vital Communities

The continuum of creative development within communities ranges from *emerging* to *sustaining* to *mature*. Within this progression, key ingredients have been identified as important to culture-led regeneration. These include:

- 1. An underlying appreciation and attitude of acceptance** towards local culture, history, people, and assets, and towards 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 volunteers and arts supporters** who work on exhibitions, festivals, and community cultural development projects; support artists in their community regeneration efforts; and inclusively encourage cultural vibrancy among all cultural groups in a community
- 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.

- 6. Governance strategies** for arts and culture situated within broader arts and cultural policies, as well as within rural strategic policy initiatives and/or agricultural policy. The applicability of urban approaches to rural settings is a concern, and strategies must consider the unique challenges specific to location. Some important considerations are:
 - **Community buy-in and integration**, including the necessity of government commitment at all levels
 - **Engaging youth**, with a focus on capacity and retention through employment, recreational, and educational initiatives
 - **Leadership development**, with the goal of developing roles of energizer, broker, coach, and champion to initiate local entrepreneurship and investment

- **Increased funding support**, aiming for sustainable, whole-community development, a reduction of bureaucratic obstacles, and an increase in community driven and controlled funding initiatives
- **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
- The need for **policy implementation and further study** with the support of government and other funding bodies
- **"Right timing."** 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 central to these efforts.

Background Factors: Conditions which may facilitate arts activity

Attitudes and Values

- Valuing of the arts for young people
- Valuing of history and sense of place by a significant number of local people
- A tradition, perhaps ethnic, of artistic activity, e.g., a town band, crafts
- Artistic expression in the community's spiritual life

An Individual "Sparkplug" (Champion/Leader)

- Life experience with one or more of the arts, training (formal/informal), participation, parental encouragement
- Passion for art
- Local knowledge and connections

Catalytic Events

- A special performance, exhibit, or celebration which sparks interest and motivation
- A planned intervention

1

EMERGING DEVELOPMENT

Leadership Organization

- Coalescence of a group of arts "instigators"
- Individual leader(s) attracts or creates a network for organizing and advocacy
- Emergence of an arts advisory group, perhaps as part of some other community gathering place

Arts Activity

- People doing art informally: community theatre, band, choir, visual artists, craft guilds
- Community groups or places that include arts activity: school, church, etc.

Additional Factors: Phase 2 of Emerging Development

Recognition and Growth

- Outside resources and funding
- Community recognition of arts' value
- Broadened network of support to other sectors of community influence
- Media coverage publicizing arts activities
- Places where art-making is done are central to community, e.g. school, library, park, gallery, main street, museum
- Economic change + or - which stimulates consideration of the arts as a solution

2

SUSTAINING DEVELOPMENT

Regular art activity in more than one discipline, e.g., school concerts/exhibits, poetry/writers' groups, visual art exhibits, band, choir, theatre performances

- Performances in a variety of venues
- A critical mass of artists, perhaps avocational
- An established advocacy and organizing group, e.g., an arts council
- Increasing participation across demographic categories
- Networking/collaboration among arts groups and artists
- A growing sense of civic engagement in the arts, including policies and plans

Additional Factors: Integration of Arts Sector

- Monetary and organizational support from the government and business communities
- Recognition by extra-local arts funders and supporters
- A physical locus for arts activity, e.g., a busy main street
- Substantial investment in time and money by local individuals; one or more arts "angels"
- Information and training

In a few cases, the addition of:

- A natural or cultural environment conducive to tourism
- Substantial investment in facilities and marketing

3

MATURE DEVELOPMENT

- Artists serve as a magnet for other artists, professionalization of the artistic community
- Artists can live and work comfortably
- Arts-related businesses
- Arts seen as central to community development; plans reflect this
- One or more facilities, e.g., a theatre, performing or visual arts centre
- Strong organizational and advocacy infrastructure, including information distribution and training

What makes the arts thrive in rural and small towns?

Chart developed by Patricia Shifferd, excerpted from *Thriving Arts: Thriving Small Communities* published by the Metropolitan Regional Arts Council, Minnesota. Edited for this publication.



The community
becomes an
arts destination

International Perspectives

Europe

Cultural heritage, contemporary art, and collective memory

Cultural heritage reflects past relationships, accomplishments, challenges, and hopes of citizens. Heritage is related to our sense of identity and people's pride of belonging to a place. Local and regional museums are an important part of a community's culture—they are in a way responsible for preserving the collective memory as they are dedicated to accumulating, documenting, exposing, and teaching heritage and history. On the other hand, contemporary art, exhibited in both commercial and public galleries and non-conventional places (as far as they exist in rural areas), does not necessarily have a

permanent character. Nor does the public always have a positive attitude towards contemporary art—they might consider it odd, especially in cases when contemporary art does not reflect certain public values or is too complex to be easily understood. However, contemporary art initiatives can play an important role in articulating a community's changing realities, issues, and complexities. Education and interaction between contemporary artists and communities is an important element to improve public acceptance of the practice of contemporary artists in rural and isolated regions. Points of

discussion in this respect usually include:

- How are contemporary artistic practice and cultural heritage development integrated (or isolated) in a rural area?
- To what extent is the contemporary art in an isolated area the "collective memory" of the future?
- What are possible partnership strategies for connecting local artistic networks with cultural heritage sites?

Lidia Varbanova, Laboratory for European Cultural Cooperation, Amsterdam/
Centre for Intercultural and Social Development, Montreal

Australia

Arts and environmental sustainability

Issues of environmental sustainability are of increasing concern to rural and remote communities in Australia, who are experiencing the greatest impact from climate change ... David Curtis of the Institute of Rural Futures at the University of New England in regional New South Wales ... suggests that visual and performing arts may be valuable in influencing environmental behaviour positively, on both individual and community levels, as the arts can "aid engagement and participation by a broad cross-section of the community, and ... provide powerful vehicles for community mobilization, empowerment, and information transfer."

... This relationship between arts and environment was explored in the Cultural Development Network's *Small Towns: Big Picture* project, undertaken in a cluster of small rural towns in

Victoria in 2002 – 2003. Social researcher Maureen Rogers set out to work with communities to create a series of local indicators of sustainability through a process of community consultation. The project methodology was upended, however, with the addition of a significant arts component, used especially as a tool of community engagement. The final result was an unprecedented success with an outstanding participation rate in the project, exemplified by the attendance of 50% of one town's entire population at the project's launch. The upshot was that this researcher, new to the arts at the beginning of the project, commented that she "couldn't imagine working with communities ever again without arts involvement."

Kim Dunphy, Cultural Development Network, Victoria

United States

Balancing a community's "sense of place" and its "poetry of place"

While *sense of place* defines how geography influences/impacts the people who live in a particular place, a community's *poetry of place* defines how the way people interact with each other influences/impacts the geography. It is the give and take, the dialectic, the balance between these two aspects of place that have the greatest influence in the development of a particular community, giving each community what could be called its overall *essence of place*.

As people move into rural areas, they are not only changing the landscape of rural communities, they are changing the community's *inscape* as well, its *poetry of place*, and this is having a disturbing impact on the *essence of place* of these communities. Increasingly, people are no longer tied to one place or, for that matter, one job or profession. Individuals can live in a particular

place and not be a part of the community in which they live. This makes them residents rather than citizens. Rural/small communities across the United States are experiencing this in a unique way as urban-to-rural migrants arrive in significant numbers.

What does this all mean? First, it means that a community has to pay attention to both its geography and its community social interaction. Second, every rural/small community in the U.S. right now has to come to grips with major changes coming their way or already present. Third, focusing on and promoting economic development may end up not being the most efficient strategy to help a community grow and prosper. At least, not the way we have traditionally defined economic development. It has become clear over the past decade that efforts to

attract businesses and industries to a community must be based on efforts to attract people to a community because it is people that make businesses and industries function. When businesses are looking to locate, they are looking for more than land or adequate natural resources or good transportation arteries. They are looking for a location that provides a good place to live and to locate families. They are looking for a combination of a community's *sense of place* (the geography and its impact on the people) and its *poetry of place* (the people, the way they interact with each other, and the impact this has on the geography).

Patrick Overton, Front Porch Institute, Astoria, Oregon

1

The arts, heritage, and culture of a community can be a wonderful way to recreate history and help new people in the community learn about the stories, cultural traditions, and heroes that made their community what it is today.

2

Getting citizens involved in arts and culture encourages them to have a broader, deeper engagement in the democracy of civil discourse. It is also a great way to get them involved in the community, meeting new people and developing a sense of being a *citizen* rather than a *resident*.

3

Citizens must remind themselves of their rich heritage and long history of creative, innovative expression, while continuing to challenge themselves to move beyond what they have done into new ways of doing things.

4

Improving the cultural infrastructure of a community makes an important difference in rural and small communities. Cultural facilities provide essential gathering places where people can meet, interact, and get to know each other.

5

Arts and cultural organizations must assess their capacity before taking on major direct and indirect economic development projects. Sometimes the organizational resource capacity is just not there to pull off what might be an excellent project. Technical assistance and organizational development resources geared to arts and cultural organizations are needed to help them build capacity and become more stable and sustainable within the rural and small community context in which they exist.

6

A key part of organizational capacity building includes creating effective recruiting and training programs for volunteers. Since younger generations tend not to give their time to just one organization, we must recognize and accommodate this short-burst approach and not consider it representative of a lower level of commitment, but as a different kind of commitment.

7

Arts and cultural organizations should create relevant cultural plans that focus on how they contribute to community vitality rather than on why they need the community to support them financially. If they do the one, the other will follow.

8

Promote a paradigm shift from “art as product and citizen as patron” to “art as process and citizen as participant.” This is consistent with the history of arts and culture being connected to ideas of self-education and self-improvement.

9

Consider using community and technical colleges as valuable local resource agencies for community cultural development work in rural and small communities.

10

Get local public officials, educators, and professionals involved, and go beyond traditional arts and culture supporters. Helping local leaders understand the contribution that arts and culture make to the community can provide a cause that propels them into stronger leadership positions, and benefits arts and cultural organizations.

11

In a rural and small community setting, instead of *the arts and creativity*, people should talk about *innovation and citizen entrepreneurship*; instead of *cultural facilities*, citizens should talk about *community gathering places*; instead of focusing on *developing creative economies*, local leaders need to talk about *shifting the economic development* focus away from an extraction economy toward a more constructive, sustainable expression economy.

12

Cultural tourism and its economic development impact must be kept in balance with a community preserving the best of what it is while promoting the most of what it can become. Bigger is not always better. Begin slowly and help citizens develop ownership. People in rural and small communities need evidence that something works. Once they see it works, they will make sure it continues.

Twelve Strategies for Success

Adapted from Patrick Overton in *Developing and Revitalizing Rural Communities Through Arts and Creativity*, CCNC, 2009

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By becoming a member of Canada's national network of creative cities, your organization will have access to valuable resources and tools developed specifically for community cultural development. Members also connect with other municipal workers across the country both through on-line forums and in person at professional development events. Call or email us today and start getting the benefit of our experience!

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