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 under-counted, 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

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.
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.

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.

— Frances Blaisstuaux, Only Connect: Art Tourism and Rural Communities, 1994

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

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).”

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.

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.

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


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.
Rosebud, Alberta
Population: 300
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 1881, 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, which provided the Vancouver Opera House and School of the Arts, who provided the Vancouver Theatre Festival, opened in 1993, is a sister organization to the Rosebud Theatre and School of the Arts, which provided the Vancouver Opera House and School of the Arts.

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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—weathed 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

Rural Solutions: Six Profiles of Arts-Based Revitalization

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

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 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

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

Bouctouche, New Brunswick

Photo courtesy of Le Pays de la Sagouine

Ross Creek Centre for the Arts
Photo: Matt Jack

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

NOUVELLES DES VILLES CRÉATIVES : ÉDITION SPÉCIALE 6
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

Additional Factors: Phase 2 of Emerging Development

- Recognition and Growth
  • Regular art activity in more than one discipline, e.g., school concerts/exhibits, poetry/lyricists’ groups, visual/arts 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 artists and artists
  • A growing sense of civic engagement in the arts, including policies and plans

Additional Factors: Sustaining Development

- 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

Additional Factors: Integration of Arts Sector

- 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

In a few cases, the addition of:
- A natural or cultural environment conducive to tourism
- Substantial investment in facilities and marketing

The community becomes an arts destination

Chart developed by Patricia Shifflett, excerpted from Thriving Arts: Thriving Small Communities published by the Metropolitan Regional Arts Council, Minnesota. Edited for this publication.
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, exhibiting 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 where 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?

Excerpts from Developing and Revitalizing Rural Communities Through Arts and Creativity, Creative City Network of Canada, 2009
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.

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.

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.

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.

Arts and cultural organizations must assess their capacity before taking on major direct and indirect economic development projects. Sometimes the organizational 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.

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.

The Developing and Revitalizing Rural Communities Through Arts and Creativity project on which this newsletter is based was commissioned by the Alberta Recreation and Parks Association.

The research was directed by Nancy Duxbury, with research assistance from Heather Campbell, at the Centre for Policy Studies on Culture and Community, meeting new people and developing a sense of being a citizen rather than a resident.

The Creative City Network of Canada gratefully acknowledges the support of:

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The research was directed by Nancy Duxbury, with research assistance from Heather Campbell, at the Centre for Policy Studies on Culture and Community at Simon Fraser University, Vancouver. Project papers are available on the Creative City Network of Canada website: creativecity.ca

Are you a creative city? Join the Creative City Network

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!