MUNICIPAL CULTURAL PLANNING

Combating the "Geography of Nowhere"

Greg Baeker

"When every place looks the same, there is no such thing as place anymore. Municipal cultural planning can help combat the 'geography of nowhere.'"[1]

Glen Murray, Principal, The Glen Murray Group

Urban consultant and former Winnipeg mayor Glen Murray drove this message home at five Municipal Cultural Planning Forums around Ontario in April 2005. The events, attended by almost 800 elected officials, senior municipal staff, and cultural and business leaders, were organized by a steering committee representing six provincial ministries,[2] the Association of Municipalities of Ontario, Council for Business and the Arts in Canada, Economic Development Council of Ontario, leading cultural service organizations including the Ontario Presenters Network, and the Centre for Cultural Management at the University of Waterloo.[3]

What brought this diverse group together? Collaboration grew out of shared recognition of the growing significance of culture in local economic development, and the more integrated municipal cultural planning approaches municipalities are turning to in order to exploit these connections. Three types of municipal cultural plans were profiled.

1. *Comprehensive and integrated cultural plans* – plans that addressed the full spectrum of arts, heritage, libraries, commercial cultural activity and other aspects of local cultural development

2. Cultural component of municipal *strategic plans or official plans*

3. Cultural components of *economic development plans or strategies*

This article provides an overview of what was learned, as well as some of the characteristics of leading practice that emerged at the forums.

Focus on Quality of Place

Glen Murray described a vision of cities and local economies built on *authenticity, quality of place and creativity.* Citing Richard Florida and Meric Gertler, Murray described quality of place as a key competitive advantage for cities in attracting and retaining a skilled labour force (the "talent class"), and that major determinants of quality of place were fundamentally "cultural": *an authentic urban environment* – characterized by a unique history, and natural and built heritage; and a *lively and diverse arts and entertainment* scene.

Vibrant, distinctive urban landscapes require more attention to preserving built and natural heritage, to creating beautiful and welcoming public spaces, to urban design and civic aesthetics. He called on municipalities to rethink "public works as public art."

These same forces drive local economic strategies based on downtown renewal and cultural tourism. They also re-

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1   James Howard Kunstler (1993), *Geography of Nowhere: The Rise and Decline of America's Man-Made Landscape,* Reed Business Information, Inc.
2   The Ontario ministries of Culture (lead); Municipal Affairs and Housing; Economic Development and Trade; Tourism and Recreation; Citizenship; and Northern Development and Mines.
3   Financial support was provided by Ontario's Ministry of Culture and the Ontario Trillium Foundation. Support was also received from the Samuel and Saidye Bronfman Family Foundation and host municipalities.

flect the longer-term global shift from an economy based on the production of goods and services to a knowledge-based economy focused on creativity and innovation.

Embrace New Language

The forums revealed a tremendous receptivity – indeed a hunger – for new ways of thinking and working. Michael Jones, a musician and leadership specialist acted as a rapporteur at one of the forums. He put it this way. "We're creating a new vocabulary. The boundaries of our language are the boundaries of our world. We need words that conjure up something in our imaginations. *We can't get there from here with the old language.*"

Underlying the discussion and good practices was a new paradigm for local cultural development called *cultural planning.* Cultural planning emerged first in Australia out of frustration on the part of local government with the cultural

and valued. The first step in the planning process is identifying and mapping cultural resources. One indirect benefit of the mapping process is that the community becomes more aware of resources or qualities of life that are taken for granted or not recognized before. Cultural mapping, as one participant put it, encourages you to become "a tourist in your own town." One barrier identified at several of the forums related to the mapping process is the difficulty many municipalities have identifying independent creators, entrepreneurs and small scale businesses working in for-profit cultural production. This activity is an essential part of the broadened vision of cultural resources and local cultural development. But this group is harder to find and engage than traditional not-for-profit groups or more formally organized cultural industries. Once cultural mapping is complete, the cultural planning process is about looking for opportunities to leverage those resources for greater economic and com-

> "This is our moment – if we don't capitalize on the moment, on the attention to these issues now, we'll have failed our generation. And we have a discipline (municipal cultural planning) with which to work."
>
> *Erina Harris, Kitchener*

policy frameworks inherited from senior levels of government. These policies tended to focus on the needs of individual disciplines – museums, libraries, theatre, dance, film and video, etc. These policy and planning "silos" were hard to connect to local need, and acted against the horizontal collaboration and capacity building needed for long-term sustainability.

Cultural planning helps combat these barriers by first changing the vocabulary. In Canada today, notions of "the arts" or "the arts and heritage" no longer do justice to the breadth of creative expression and cultural activity found in communities. Cultural planning talks instead of *cultural resources*. The phrase itself is significant – and deliberate. Culture is an unapologetic *resource* for city building in all its dimensions – social, economic, civic. There is little "arts-for-arts-sake" here.

Cultural resources, as understood in the cultural planning paradigm, broaden and democratize the definition of local culture. They of course include those more traditionally defined activities in the arts, heritage, libraries and for-profit or commercial cultural industries. But they go further to include: the built environment and cultural landscapes; local traditions; dialects, festivals and local customs; the diversity and quantity of leisure opportunities; the cultural activities of youth, ethno-racial and other communities of interest; local products; and skills in crafts, design, new media, manufacturing, etc. Broadly speaking, cultural resources encompass all of those things that together define the unique identity and sense of place of that community.

Begin With Cultural Mapping

Cultural planning assumes that culture is locally created

munity benefit. A large focus is on finding pathways to integrating cultural and larger civic agendas of all kinds.

Adopt a Cultural Lens

The Ottawa Arts and Heritage Plan was one of the good practices profiled at the forums. It was one of five plans that comprised Ottawa 20/20, a 20-year growth management strategy for the city. Debbie Hill, manager cultural services for the City of Ottawa described how, in Ottawa, they were seeking to bring a "cultural lens" to bear on virtually all municipal planning issues.

Participants expressed interest in follow-up research and work that would define more clearly what a cultural lens was, how it could work, and how matching measures or indicators could be developed to assist municipalities in integrating it effectively in planning and decision-making.

Embrace Shared Governance Models

Another characteristic that was shared by good practices profiled at the forums was the use of mechanisms to engage diverse local stakeholders in developing shared vision, identifying opportunities, pooling resources, and taking collective action. These municipalities, in short, are implementing new collective planning and decision-making (governance) systems.

Some took the form of multi-sectoral advisory committees to council – such as the Peterborough Arts, Culture and Heritage Advisory Board. Others took less conventional forms – the Prince Edward County Cultural Roundtable, for example.

A frequently noted barrier in many municipalities was the absence of a convening body or agency representing the full

spectrum of local arts, heritage, library, cultural industry activity. While community arts councils exist in many Ontario municipalities, and represent many important arts groups and activities, relatively few have constituencies outside the arts.

Bust Silos

Another defining characteristic of good practices is the breaking down of barriers that separate categories of activity. The point is not abandoning disciplinary distinctions (visual arts, theatre, museums, libraries), but rather building partnerships, linking resources, and generating a larger impact than any single activity could achieve on its own.

"Silo busting" is a trend beyond Canada. A prominent recent study in the United States concludes that the challenge for the cultural sector in the US is overcoming past fragmentation and mobilizing a new cultural movement uniting the arts, heritage and folk life, historic preservation, libraries and archives, museums, and the humanities. Without these alliances, the report concludes, the sector will never achieve the critical mass necessary to advance its interests.[4]

In this context, one of the most promising and hopeful developments at the forums was the interest expressed by public libraries in engaging in municipal cultural planning and collective action with other local cultural organizations. Staff and board members from public libraries argued this is part of a larger shift in the library community, from viewing themselves as book repositories and information centres, to more proactive community development agencies.

Barriers to Progress

Discussion at the forums, combined with the results of a participant survey, confirmed the following barriers to advancing municipal cultural planning in Ontario (in order of priority):
- ▶ the need for dedicated financial resources to support planning;
- ▶ lack of understanding and support on the part of elected officials and senior municipal staff;
- ▶ no convening body or agency to draw community stakeholders together;
- ▶ lack of consensus (or division) within the local cultural sector; and
- ▶ lack of access to tools, information and expertise.

While resources are needed, the issue is not only money. Many pointed to the need for a clearly articulated policy framework or legislative foundation for municipal cultural planning as one of the most powerful levers for change.

The forums increased awareness and generated considerable energy and momentum. They also identified a series of next steps that must be taken, and at two levels. First, the need for practical tools and resources to increase the capacity of municipalities to undertake cultural planning "on-the-ground." Second, reviewing existing policies and programs across a wide range of provincial ministries and agencies to see how they might be adapted or extended to support municipal cultural planning. *MW*

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4   *Policy Partners: Making the Case for State Investments in Culture.* Funded by the Pew Charitable Trust and undertaken by the Centre for Arts and Culture, Washington, DC.

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