Cultural Planning – Policy Task, not Tool

Deborah Mills considers the significance of culture in the planning process, and suggests 'ways of seeing' culture within the functions of local government.

DEBORAH MILLS

For the last 15 years or so, cultural planning has been promoted by Federal and State Governments as a good thing for local government to do in order to elevate the status of culture within the realm of local government activity so that it could take its place alongside other strategic plans developed by councils for land use, transport, social and economic development. In some instances it was seen as part of an integrated local area planning process which would equip councils to effectively plan for the needs of their communities in integrated and holistic ways.

With some isolated exceptions, this project has failed either to elevate the status of cultural concerns within local government or become part of an integrated local area planning process.

I should like to propose two reasons for this failure.

Firstly, culture has remained marginalised because it has been viewed as something to add to the list of topics that an integrated planning process must address, rather than something which could inform the whole planning process itself. For this reason it has remained a thing apart, with its own budget, staffing and operations. Cultural planning is seen as planning for culture, or at least arts resources management, which leads me to my second reason for failure, what I like to refer to as the 'arts plus' swindle.

By this I mean the tendency of the arts-led push to talk about culture, but to focus on the role that the arts can play in furthering the economic and social objectives of government. This emphasis fails to recognise the role that art and culture play in determining values and aspirations - in giving meaning to peoples lives. This 'arts plus' approach has reinforced the marginalisation of cultural planning within the government context - it is seen as the icing on the cake rather than the yeast, without which the cake fails to rise to its full potential.

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Some Early Attempts at Cultural Planning

Much of what purported to be cultural planning undertaken in the early 1990s tended to focus on developing a relationship between councils and their arts community. The emphasis was on mapping the arts resources of a community and identifying strengths and gaps. In some instances the scope of the mapping was expanded to include the built environment and heritage, but for the most part it concentrated on the arts.

Few projects attempted to encompass a broader cultural framework or make specific attempts to establish links with broader economic and social structures and mechanisms, perhaps due to the difficulty of establishing mechanisms which could deliver such an integrated vision.

One such attempt was in 1993 in South East Queensland (SEQ 2001) where rapid growth in the population was significantly challenging government policy makers. This project attempted to ensure that the planning for cultural resources, policies and actions was integrated with the processes for industrial, economic, environmental and social planning (Regional Planning Advisory Group, 1993). While the long-term results of this project are not readily discernable, the project is important for the important principles it establishes for cultural planning, which still hold true today:

1. It moves beyond the arts in what it encompasses. In this project cultural resources were seen to include:
   - the arts and crafts
   - cultural industries of film, video, broadcasting, photography, electronic music, publishing, design and fashion
   - the structures and skills for the management and development, distribution, marketing and audience development for the products of the arts, crafts and cultural industries
   - commercial and public cultural facilities
   - the built environment and humanly created landscapes
   - local traditions
   - ethnic and cultural diversity
   - heritage
   - the natural environment
   - the image of a community

2. It acknowledges up front that indigenous peoples and people of non-English speaking backgrounds may have different policy frameworks and protocols and this consciousness is reflected throughout the project's work.

3. It emphasises the importance of making strategic connections between cultural policy and activity and infrastructure development, industry location and development, urban consolidation, human services, community development and land use.

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4. It introduces an industry development model. By this I mean, the project challenges the distinction between commercial and subsidised arts activity and encourages policy makers to look beyond the supply side of the arts into strategies for supporting the whole process of art making including training of artists, manufacture, marketing and distribution.

5. It introduces the concept of cultural indicators. There has been a great deal written about cultural indicators since, and I will come back to this point later in this paper, as they can play a useful role in both shaping and implementing policy within a multi-disciplinary environment.

More Recent Cultural Plans

Some of the cultural policies produced for local government in the late 1990s have gone beyond mapping arts resources and reflect some of the principles evident in SEQ 2001. They do this in two main ways, firstly in the scope of the topics included under the heading of cultural development and secondly in the range of strategic connections they make with other sectors.

For example, Wollongong Council's Cultural Plan which was signed off in July 1998 is broad in scope encompassing urban design, urban regeneration, economic development and tourism. The policy advocates establishing links with other sectors, in particular the education sector, National Parks and Wildlife, the Department of State and Regional Development, the film industry and the local Business Chamber.

Newcastle's cultural policy has a strong cultural industry development focus. The city's cultural industries play a role in helping to reposition what has been seen as a dirty, industrial town to a contemporary, vital and culturally diverse place to live and work. The strategy also emphasises the role that the arts and culture play in developing citizenship and participation in civic life.

In the case of both Wollongong and Newcastle, the recruitment of other departments of council into the implementation of the cultural plan have included ensuring that Section 94 plans reflect the need to levy for cultural infrastructure and, in the case of Newcastle, integration of the funding for public art and place-making into the budgets of the engineering and planning divisions and into the Development Control Plans developed for the city. In this sense, these policies are beginning to focus on a whole of council approach to cultural development and are attempting to integrate a cultural development agenda into the operations of those sections of council responsible for infrastructure, land use and human services.

Fremantle Council's cultural policy was finalised in 1999 and goes further than either Wollongong or Newcastle in the way in which it is securely entrenched into council's other strategic planning policies and processes. The cultural policy is informed by and in turn informs the sustainability plan, participation policy, the youth strategy, the urban design strategy, the town planning scheme review, the artworks in public places strategy, the green plan and the recreation plan. An in-house project team was formed to help define the nature of the project and to ensure integration across the organisation in both the plan's development and implementation.

Although the scope of some local cultural polices has broadened beyond the arts, none reflect the full extent of official Commonwealth Government policy which categorises the functions of cultural production into 17 sectors including media, education and sport. Apart from the old Brisbane City Council policy, I have only found one Australian local government cultural policy that acknowledges and supports the role that sport plays in reflecting and developing culture, and that is the policy of Thuringowa City Council in North Queensland.

Overseas it is a different matter. The *Culture & the City* document produced by the Cultural Strategy Partnership for London for the Mayor and London Assembly around 1999 covers 'the arts, tourism and sport, museums and galleries, library services, broadcasting, film production and other media, and the buildings, sites and collections which form the heritage of greater London.' (*Culture & the City*). Strategic links are proposed in *Culture & the City* with a very wide range of sectors including transport, libraries, education, digital educational institutions, independent and commercial cultural institutions, the media, tourism, the business community, *Local Agenda 21*, the health sector, volunteer organisations, developers, funding bodies and employment and training agencies.

The Public Policy Context

During the last two decades of the twentieth century, public policy was dominated by economic rationalism. Much arts policy consequently focussed on repositioning the arts as an industry and justifying public expenditure in terms of the economic impact of the arts. This use of the language and metaphors of the old dominant paradigm – the economy – can hold us back from fully realizing the potential of culture as part of integrated local area planning. I will return to this point in a moment, but first I want to discuss the other significant development in public policy, namely the push for sustainability.

With the 'triple bottom line' approach to public planning the economic imperative is no longer dominant, at least in theory. Economic objectives must now be achieved simultaneously with social and environmental sustainability. Jon Hawkes argues in his monograph *The Fourth Pillar of Sustainability: Culture's Essential Role in Public Planning,* for 'culture to become [the] fourth dimension', He states that this fourth dimension is necessary if we are to ensure effective ways of ' moving towards a society that authentically embodies the values of its citizens', and where those citizens have a 'shared expression of, and commitment to, a sense of meaning and purpose.' (ibid. p11).

Hawkes also explores how culture is embedded in many of the public planning concepts which have gained prominence in the last ten years. Sustainable development, for instance, is open to numerous interpretations and these in turn, are based on differing values - values which are informed by cultural perspectives. Community building, capacity building and social capital are all concepts which refer to the glue that welds a community together, and that glue is the production and maintenance of values of interdependency, tolerance and respect. The making and maintenance of these values is a cultural process. Livability and quality of life may have something to do with urban amenity, but attachment and a sense of belonging may have more to do with an icon (a tree, a landmark, a person), or shared and collective memory or just 'the feel of the place'. If our planners could un-tap these intangibles, then public consultation processes may be rescued from the rather arid rituals they are in danger of becoming, and our planning policies may more closely reflect something deeper than the values of planning elites.

This is not an argument for justifying why arts and culture should receive public support. Nor is it an argument for the arts as a tool for achieving government economic, environmental and social objectives. Rather, it is a way of making visible what has until now remained invisible to planners; the cultural concepts which underpin, often implicitly, many public planning policies. If we can acknowledge these concepts and recognise them as living, breathing parts of individual and community life, then we can give new meaning and force to efforts to achieve sustainable economic, social and environmental development.

Cultural policy is often confused with arts policy

Now I would like to return to an examination of the way in which the blurring of the meanings of the word culture is proving an impediment to the effective realization of cultural planning.

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The distortion of the meaning of culture to a notion of 'arts plus' when it is applied to various public functions goes hand in hand with the use of the arts and culture as a tool for the achievement of government economic and/or social goals.

As Hawkes writes:

> *The emphasis on the economic dimension of culture has caused the focus of policy to be on transactions in the market place (e.g. attendance at arts events, sales of arts objects) rather than on wider issues of social meanings, values and aspirations.* (ibid. pp. 7,8).

Like Hawkes, I am arguing for a new rationale for government involvement in the arts and culture, one which recognises that the way in which we make sense of the world and perpetuate our view of the world is through cultural processes and practices. If the stated objectives of government's involvement in planning are to be achieved – sustainability, regional distinctiveness, capacity building and so on – then planning processes must uncover cultural resonance and meaning and engage citizens in these processes. Art making and creative endeavour are then the means by which citizens acquire the skills, language and connectedness to engage in these processes.

While we continue with the 'arts plus' approach we run the risk of seeing cultural matters continually marginalised. The arts will be seen as something we do after we have taken care of the 'important things' - roads, land use planning, child care centres, recycling.

Developing and applying a cultural framework

What is needed is a re-conceptualisation of the policy task and objective so that we understand that cultural development can function simultaneously as a means of ensuring sustainable economic, environmental and social development through cultural development. For this reason a cultural framework which can be applied to all aspects of the planning process may be more effective than a distinct cultural policy.

Take an inner suburban street of terrace houses. Let's look at it from the perspective of the different disciplines brought to bear in an integrated planning process.

From an **urban development** perspective the street could become a site for contesting urban consolidation and multiple occupancy.

From a **heritage** perspective, the street could become a site in which efforts are made to conserve site lines, scale and heritage features.

From a **public safety perspective**, the street becomes a site in which maintaining the informal surveillance of the street is important. Planners may wish, therefore, to stem the construction of large garages in front yards which can obscure the ability of people living in the houses to interact with the street.

From an **economic perspective**, the planners may wish to promote the tourist potential of the heritage buildings and streetscape, or may be ignorant of the cultural implications of the installation of a shopping mall in the next suburb on the viability of the corner store, an important neighbourhood resource and heritage feature.

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The **engineers** may see it as an important linking road in a local area road transport network and be required to examine the impact that the upgrade of the road will have on the social capital of that community.

The **social planners** may want to preserve the interaction which occurs across the street and the casual conversations from the front steps and balconies which easily move into more intense conversations in the common ground i.e. in the street running between the houses.

The **arts workers** may see the street as a site for street festivals, parades or place-making, where residents have an opportunity to put their stamp on the neighbourhood through public participatory design and public arts projects.

My point is that each of these dimensions to planning has a cultural dimension and that rather than stake out yet another separate and distinct (cultural) empire, we should be establishing a cultural framework through which all planning can be evaluated. This is where indicators of cultural vitality become important, because in order for these impacts to be assessed and evaluated cultural indicators need to be developed.

My other point is one put very well by Colin Mercer in his latest book, namely that 'cultural planning must take as its basis the pragmatic principle that culture is what counts as culture for those who participate in it. This can mean contemplating an art object and it can mean strolling down the street..' (Mercer, 2002 p174).

Cultural Indicators

Much work has been done in other sectors to integrate economic, environmental and social sustainability indicators. There has been a great deal written on cultural indicators, in particular, Jon Hawkes proposes the development of indicators which capture the impact of planning activity on:

- cultural content, i.e. values, identity, aspirations, history;
- cultural processes and mediums (practice): fluency in and access to cultural expression;
- cultural manifestations (results): community initiated cultural action, public access to presented cultural activity, and so on (ibid. p 39-47, 57-60).

Others such as the ALGA (1997) Grogan and Mercer (1995) and Matarasso (1999) also explore a range of indicators for liveability and cultural vitality, all of which attempt to measure the impact of activity on the qualities communities may define for themselves as valuable, rather than what may be defined as desirable by planners or other political or administrative elites.

In his latest book, Colin Mercer (2002) takes some of these ideas further and proposes, 'a sustained dialogue between cultural research, indicator identification and practical policy [as] vital and the context in which indicators become 'tools of policy dialogue'.'

Not Only ... But Also

The development of a cultural framework and appropriate indicators are only part of the story for successful cultural planning.

Because of the 'bottom up' approach to defining culture as 'what counts for those who participate in it' (Mercer 2002, ibid. p174), then cultural mapping and other participatory strategies must be employed if we are to effectively tap into values, meanings and relationships and how people use and interact with cultural goods and services. We need to go beyond the mapping of just the goods and services themselves.

We need political leadership which is able to sustain its commitment to cultural planning processes and frameworks over longer than one term in office. We need policies which direct planning decisions in ways which are consistent with the cultural, economic, social and

environmental outcomes agreed to for our communities. We need planning tools, e.g. Development Control Plans, Cultural Impact Statements, with which to apply these policies and make them live. We need the staff who implement these policy ideas to understand them.

We need organisational arrangements for policy delivery. These will include reorganising budget and administrative frameworks to ensure that the scope of the policy is fulfilled, the strategic connections secured and the mechanisms established to deliver an integrated policy. We need to develop partnerships with other organisations which share our commitment to cultural planning processes and frameworks and who understand the need to make culture the policy task and objective, not the tool.

While finalising this article my attention was drawn to City of Port Phillip in Victoria which has produced a Corporate Plan for 2002 – 2006 based on four key goals, which they refer to as pillars, perhaps in an acknowledgment of Jon Hawkes' influence on their thinking. The four pillars of the City of Port Phillip's Corporate Plan are Economic Viability, Environmental Responsibility, Cultural Vitality and Social Equity. This corporate plan is an impressive application of many of the ideas referred to in this paper, and their section on indicators is interesting not only for its comprehensiveness, but for the boldness of their political vision and commitment. It would be a mistake, however, to ascribe what may be a model application of integrated cultural planning in local government to the act of any one individual. The City of Port Phillip has a long history of commitment to social, environmental, economic and cultural development and sustainability. It has attracted some outstanding leadership at both the political and administrative level (Tim Costello, Jude Monroe, Anne Dunn). A study of the council's organisational arrangements polices and policy tools and their effectiveness in giving life to the vision of the plan would be worth doing, but that is another story for another time ■

*This article is adapted from a paper delivered at a Local Government Community Services Association Seminar, *Developing People and Places: The Role of Cultural and Recreational Planning/Development in Local Government*, July 2002

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THE VERY SHORT ANSWER ON DR MILLS
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