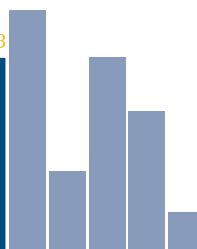


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General Overview of the Think Tank on Culture in the City: Facts, Experiences, and Challenges Quebec City, May 2003

On May 8 and 9, 2003, Québec's Ministère de la Culture et des Communications and the Canadian network of municipal cultural planners held a think tank in Québec City for stakeholders in public policy, academic research, and municipal planning. More than thirty people from Canada, France, and the United Kingdom attended the event.

The purpose of the gathering was to discuss changes in the field and new practices for developing local culture, as well as their impact on:

- The development of local cultural strategies
- The need for research and knowledge
- The support upper levels of government should provide for municipal policies

Generally speaking, the discussions showed that the most appropriate type of cultural policies are those that are horizontal, realistic, and based on the public's needs. The think tank was part of a reflective process addressing the challenges of cultural development – especially that of merging culture with community development and, its counterpart, fostering the public's involvement in the progress of culture and communication.

This paper introduces a few key ideas that emerged from the event. Proceedings from the think tank are being drawn up and will soon be available. They will give a more thorough description of the presentations and discussions that took place during these three very inspiring days.

Attendees:

Abd El Nour, Hanna, Université du Québec à Trois-Rivières
 Baeker, Greg, ACP Consulting
 Bass, Brad, Ontario Ministry of Municipal Affairs
 Brown, Geoffrey, EUCLID International, United Kingdom
 Cardinal, Donna, Cardinal Concepts
 Champagne, Marie-Josée, Ministère de la Culture et des Communications
 Choquette, Michel, City of Québec
 Daigle, Andrée, Les Arts et la Ville
 Dalphond, Claude Edgar, Ministère de la Culture et des Communications
 de la Durantaye, Michel, Université du Québec à Trois-Rivières
 Delangie, Denis, Ministère de la Culture et des Communications
 Doherty, Ken, City of Peterborough
 Ferland, Dominic, Municipalité régionale de comté (MRC) de Memphrémagog
 Fortin, Claire, Ministère de la Culture et des Communications
 Fortin, Lynda, Ministère de la Culture et des Communications
 Galarneau, Michelle, Ministère de la Culture et des Communications
 Garon, Rosaire, Ministère de la Culture et des Communications
 Gauthier, Anne, Ministère de la Culture et des Communications
 Gosselin, Gaëtan, Conseil des arts et des lettres du Québec
 Grandmont, Gérald, Ministère de la Culture et des Communications
 Jeannotte, Sharon, Department of Canadian Heritage
 Laperrière, Rachel, City of Montréal
 Laquerre, Stéphanie, City of Longueuil
 Lemay, Paul, City of Laval
 Lépine, Julien, Ministère de la Culture et des Communications
 Mercier, Véronique, Municipalité régionale de comté (MRC) d'Arthabaska
 Phair, Michael, City of Edmonton
 Véroïque Pouliot, City of Lévis
 Pronovost, Gilles, Université du Québec à Trois-Rivières
 Saez, Jean-Pierre, Observatoire des Politiques culturelles de Grenoble
 Stevenson, Alida, Ontario Ministry of Culture
 Straw, William, McGill University
 William, Robert, University of Waterloo
 Wilson, Daniel, The Ontario Trillium Foundation

What is culture?

For the purposes of the discussions at hand, attendees adopted a very broad definition of culture, viewing it not as a sectoral matter or activity, but rather as an aspect of community life, in the same sense as the economy, development, and healthcare. However, it is important that the inclusive and intersectoral aspects of culture not draw us back to the anthropological view of culture suggested in Québec's 1978 white paper on cultural policy. This view was not retained in Québec's 1992 cultural policy, which used a more narrow definition of culture.

The current challenge in culture consists of reconciling the humanist, professional tradition, which draws heavily on the arts and literature, with a broader and more modern definition that encompasses individuals and their living environment. Attendees discussed the relative weight of public intervention in high culture, popular culture, and newly emerging forms of culture.

The relationship between culture and development

Attendees viewed local and regional involvement in culture as a basic trend that should be taken into account in any consideration of culture and development. They often raised the relationship between these concepts (culture and development). Culture clearly appears to be an important factor in the quality of life a community offers. However, there is little documentation supporting the idea that culture has a role in local development. Research is thus required to help define and understand the new models of cultural development. If culture plays a role in development, how exactly does it do so? What does it look like and how is it attributed a value? These questions remain unanswered and are areas for future research.

Cultural policies

The empirical research conducted during the last twenty years and more in Québec and France shows that the policies democratizing culture and instruments for measuring it seem to have plateaued.

Of course, we must recognize the huge advances that have been made in terms of the accessibility and reach of culture and the diversity of its forms. Québec has been studying cultural behavior for 25 years and has seen undeniable changes in accessibility.

However, studies have also shown disturbing trends. Audiences for classic or humanist culture, which draws much of its support from national institutions, seem to be have plateaued, or even dropped off. They are also aging. On the other hand, the culture produced by the culture industries is growing fast, which raises the question of the distribution and diversity of cultural products. The difficulty of reaching non-users of cultural services also illustrates the limit of policies in seeking to democratize culture.

A consensus formed around the idea that to be effective, cultural strategies must work horizontally. They must be transversal, interdisciplinary, and intersectoral. Attendees therefore considered the relationship between culture, cities, schools, families, and community organizations to be of primary importance. There must be a community of thought between them and a shared approach to issues. Actions and policies must bring together the entire community, have one or more common objectives, and adopt a holistic or systemic perspective.

Arts and literature are for individuals, but it is now also important that their economic and social impacts be considered. In fact, intangible goods (knowledge) are becoming more and more important as opposed to tangible goods. That is why innovative strategies that allow cultural institutions to forge ties with stakeholders in a number of sectors of their communities should be explored. Sector or discipline-based approaches have not seen strong enough results in terms of the public's participation.

The attendees consider local cultural policies to be valuable development tools. Many believe they help spur both elected officials and the public to action. Cultural policies make it possible to consolidate existing practices and programs and keep cultural matters on the table in local government despite administrative and political changes.

Funding

Horizontal cultural policies addressing all local challenges must be further discussed if they are to be implemented at the municipal level.

Municipal representatives emphasized the limits imposed by municipal taxation. Because it is based on property tax, the system encourages the supply of services related to land ownership rather than services for individuals or communities. This makes the social and cultural aspects of local community life seem secondary to municipal taxation.

Paradoxically, cities have been pushed to take a growing role in the field of culture. According to the municipalities, occupying new fields of activity will require new sources of revenue and changes to the existing fiscal framework. Many say this puts us at a crossroads. The cities are notably having trouble finding the venture capital to devote to culture.

Attendees from major urban centers suggested that a source of the additional revenue required to broaden the scope of municipal cultural action may be the federal government. They noted that the Department of Canadian Heritage is relatively absent from Québec's municipal cultural institutions, as compared to its presence in English Canada. One possible avenue, it was suggested, may be to set Montreal apart as Canada's French-speaking capital and obtain the appropriate funding as such. The question of the political legitimacy of such an action was not discussed.

It was also pointed out that in France, local communities devote 14% of their budgets to culture. They are key players in the sector and have had much impact on the country's cultural development. Communities and artists, however, are not asking the French state to withdraw, the former for financial reasons and the latter for considerations of artistic neutrality.

Preparing elected officials

Many of those involved in local cultural development have emphasized that the will to act depends more on the individual than the political context. They thus consider it necessary that local elected officials be trained and the municipal public service be skilled in cultural matters in order to better support volunteers in the cultural sector.

Elected officials must be amply supplied with strategic information, success stories, or facts, particularly with regard to the economic impact of cultural development. Cultural marking plans could also prove useful at the local level. To this end, the program "Ville et village d'art et de patrimoine", work by Les Arts et la Ville network and researchers in local cultural development appear essential to those concerned.

Elusive cultures

It would also seem that many local cultural activities do not even show on researchers' radar. This is the case for the more local dimensions of culture, such as public participation, emerging forms of culture, or volunteering. These components are no less important to local and regional culture. At the local level, culture has many forums and uses a wide variety of facilities (e.g., schools, outdoor areas, community centers, churches, shopping centers, etc.). These dimensions go unobserved. Acknowledging the cultural vitality of regions through tools that address their needs was also matter of concern to think tank attendees.

Young people also escape our radars. They behave in new ways and have a new take on culture. They prefer group activities that are interactive and hands-on and allow them personal expression. Free cultural weeklies may help define this cultural world and spread knowledge of it. There seems to be two cultures among youths—one during the day and another at night—each with its own characteristics.

The cultural world of children is also much in the shadows. Most studies target people aged 15 and over or adults. We know virtually nothing about children. Another area where knowledge is lacking is the transmission of culture, notably as lifestyles change. Family certainly plays a role. But what about the school, the community, childhood experiences, art courses, and peer group influences?

Lastly, the think tank reminded us that the decision to participate in a cultural activity is driven by more than mere content; it is part of a complex dynamic combining a variety of factors (the activity's meaning, social aspects, accessibility, the time available, risks, etc.)

These cultural worlds are largely foreign to researchers and deserve their attention. However, our studies, methods, and indicators are poorly suited to them.

Conclusion

The think tank brought to the fore a coming crisis in cultural development. Three challenges were identified.

The first challenge concerns users and the ability of cultural institutions to maintain interest in and attendance at conventional culture events. It also raises the challenge of creating balance between traditional cultural institutions and new forms of cultural expression. To this end, understanding what young people need and identifying the best ways to reach all audiences are critical.

The municipal funding of cultural activities increasingly associated with the competitiveness of cities and the quality of life they offer is the second challenge. It would appear wise to reflect on the responsibilities and areas of jurisdiction of the respective levels of government in terms of funding.

Lastly, the relationship between culture and local development raised the challenge of merging culture with a community's progress. This challenge contains a philosophical dimension—the contrast between the instrumental aspect of culture and the requirements of pure, free-spirited artistic creation. It provoked discussion on the issue of recognizing and valuing culture as a means of contributing to the social inclusion of young people, cultural communities, and the underprivileged.

The debates begun during the Québec City gathering raised as many questions as they provided answers on the meaning of cultural action. The core themes that emerged were attracting audiences, identifying sources of funding, and defining culture's role in the community. Cities offer residents such services as libraries, festivals, and recreational and entertainment facilities. We must now determine whether culture can find solid support within these institutions, and if so, how. At a time when public involvement in the practice and management of culture has become a key concern, this challenge looms large.

These inspiring discussions and debates should go on.

Proceedings from the Think Tank on “Culture in the City: Facts, Experiences, and Challenges” will be available this fall. You may request your copy now by contacting Ms Martine Blouin at martine.blouin@mcc.gouv.qc.ca.

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