

BLUE PLATE SPECIAL

CREATIVE CITIES: THE ROLE OF CULTURE
Presentation by Robert Palmer
to the Department of Canadian Heritage

by
M. Sharon Jeannotte & Maureen Williams
Strategic Research and Analysis (SRA)
Strategic Policy and Research Branch
Department of Canadian Heritage

25 Eddy Street, 12th Floor
Hull, Québec
CANADA K1A 0M5

March 2003

Reference: SRA-617-e

For a PDF copy of this report contact us at:
sradoc_docras@pch.gc.ca
or Fax: (819) 997-6765

** The opinions expressed in this report are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Department of Canadian Heritage.

Over the past 15 years, Robert Palmer has worked with many European cities to develop cultural strategies and policies. In many cases, these have aimed to reposition the particular city both nationally and internationally as well as focusing on local and regional issues such as the development of cultural industries, cultural tourism, creativity and social inclusion. Robert Palmer is currently an independent consultant and advisor, working with the European Commission and the British Council. He is also president of the Network of European Cultural Cities (30 cities). Robert Palmer was born in Canada and is a graduate of York University. He has lived and worked in Europe for the past twenty years.

In his presentation to the Department of Canadian Heritage, Palmer addressed four topics: the historical background to current national cultural policy; the development of interest in holistic cultural planning; the international focus on creativity and creative development; and the trend of harnessing culture for economic development. His address was followed by a brief question period.

Evolution of National Cultural Policy

Palmer described five phases that can be discerned in Canadian national cultural policy:

- *1950s and 1960s.* This period was dominated by the Massey- Lévesque Commission and could be described as one which was dominated by “art for arts sake”. There was essentially a two-tier structure: professional or “high arts” and “popular” or “ethnic” culture. In general, public access to the high arts was subsidized and there were discipline-based policies largely divorced from the economic domain.
- *1960s and 1970s.* This can be described as the “decentralization” and “democratization” phase influenced by social movements that developed in under-served communities. Examples of this were the many groups that formed to protect local heritage, and the growth of community arts organizations. There was a real challenge to the dominant “high arts” and a rapid development of independent film production and book publishing as well as the establishment of artist-run arts organizations.
- *Mid 1970s - 1980s.* This period was dominated by “arts for the economy’s sake.” Culture was viewed as an investment in job-creation. Large scale attractions such as concert halls were built. Additionally, there was an increased focus on cultural tourism and an increased concern for national identity in the face of American cultural products.
- *Late 1980s.* This period saw the trend towards urban regeneration being led by the arts. Cultural policy was seen as an engine of regeneration and the concept of cultural districts became prevalent. In the USA, a large role in promoting these areas was played by private philanthropy. While at the time the idea of cultural districts was less of a focus in Canada, it seems to have taken hold in recent years with an increased emphasis on public space, architecture and the built environment.
- *1990s.* This decade saw a shift towards more sophisticated industrial strategies such as the concept of cultural industries. There was a greater understanding of changes in cultural production, distribution and consumption as well as a broadening of the definition of culture to include such things as fashion, design, and architecture. In Europe, there has also been an increasing focus on cultural policy, in particular, for the audio-visual industries.

The Development of Cultural Planning

Cultural planning, according to Robert Palmer, developed during the late 1990s as a response to policy needs associated with the EU Cultural Capitals project, in particular those of Barcelona and Glasgow. Cultural planning was very much a reaction to economic planning, in that it takes a horizontal perspective and incorporates issues such as social inclusion, diversity, civic engagement as well as a broad understanding of what constitutes culture and cultural activities. It aims to encourage a shift in public perception from culture as the “high arts” to one where culture includes such things as local crafts, traditions, and practices. However, Palmer noted that in increasing what is understood as culture, cultural planning opens established cultural activities to challenge by diverse populations.

The International Focus on Creativity and Creative Development

Recent developments in cultural policy can be described as emphasizing the role of culture in the creative economy. This, in Palmer’s view comes from the fact that cultural value is derived, in large part, from an appreciation of new ideas. Cultural industries have become “creative industries” and “creative capital” which, by implication, require investment. These investments focus strongly on making connections through networks to support continuous learning, training and development. In some senses, there is a trend towards the melding of culture and technology particularly in the case of the transfer of knowledge. This has led to what Palmer calls “aesthetic reflexivity” or the rethinking of cultural values and priorities, and the tendency of culture to move out of its hierarchical shells to decentralized and more open systems. Accompanying these trends has been an emphasis on capacity within communities and development of cultural indicators. Both of these factors are manifested in the recent growth of local cultural development organizations.

Implications for Federal Cultural Policy

In light of the developments in cultural planning and the increasing emphasis on creativity, Palmer noted that there are significant observable changes relevant to Canadian Federal Cultural Policy. These include developments within the environment of cultural policy in Europe and the United States. Given the close connections between Canada, the USA and the EU in this respect, it is important to note that there is extensive work going on in the USA, UK, and the Netherlands, as well as in Australia. For example, in the US, Craig Dreeszen advocates for more inclusive cultural policies as described in his *Cultural Planning Handbook* (1999). In the UK, the Department of Culture, Media and Sport has been working since 1999 on an approach to local cultural development that emphasizes inclusion, and participation.

Associated with these developments is the tendency, particularly in Europe, to focus on cities as engines of creativity. While research in this area has been ongoing for some time, (for example, work done by Michael Porter on cities as centres of diversity linked to regional “creative clusters”), more recent work carried out by Richard Florida of Princeton University has re-emphasized the critical role of cities. Although there is some discussion whether the “Florida thesis” is a passing fad or a real breakthrough, culture is definitely now seen as an asset-base for cities with the phenomenon being observed throughout the world. In the UK, in particular, several initiatives are underway. The Core Cities Group (www.corecities.com) focuses on the building of city networks using the argument that national policies are needed to promote city cultural development. There is also an initiative, supported by the national government, to co-ordinate an international events strategy. Further, core city development

funds and city based cultural taxes are being considered.

In Canada, a city approach, such as that seen in the UK, US and Europe, would have to take into account constitutional barriers and different jurisdictional relationships between cities and provinces. Nevertheless, cities in Canada do seem to be in the vanguard of cultural planning. The Creative Cities Network, supported by the Department of Canadian Heritage, connects 80 cities through a web-site that functions as a vehicle for information sharing.

In his discussion of the implications for federal cultural policy, Palmer emphasized several, more general points. We need to :

- promote culture as a fourth pillar of sustainable development, in addition to economic, social and environmental sustainable development;
- understand culture in terms of the whole system – a sort of cultural ecology approach – especially when considering cultural mapping and the flows of people, information and goods that sustain this dynamic system;
- understand the state of cultural planning in Canada;
- develop more empirical evidence regarding cultural planning; and
- broaden the range of stakeholders involved in federal cultural policy.

Question period

During the question period, Palmer noted that at the heart of arts policy in PCH is community participation and cultural organization sustainability. These goals are reflected in the support that the Department gives to the Creative Cities network.

The questions addressed two topics: the role of PCH and cultural policy development at the level of the city-region.

The Role of PCH

- What do we need to do in order to understand the 'creative' part of our mission?

In Palmer's opinion, the 'creative, part of the departmental mission is best understood by simultaneously building on our experience and incorporating different methods of doing research. He suggested that we need to do more 'action' research, that is undertaking projects that have both a research and capacity-building function.¹ In addition, Palmer stressed that it is necessary to make linkages across research silos, between scientific creativity and artistic creativity, between innovation and creativity.

¹ Action Research: is educative; deals with individuals as members of social groups; is problem-focused, context-specific and future-orientated; involves a change intervention; involves a cyclic process in which research, action and evaluation are interlinked; aims at improvement and involvement; and is founded on a research relationship in which those involved are participants in the change process.

- How do you break down the federal silos between policy areas?
Again, Palmer stressed the need to form linkages and networks, for example, through intra- and inter-departmental task forces. He also noted that the promotion of tri-level discussions at the local level are needed. Further, it is necessary to share information continuously and evaluate activities.
- What research needs to be done?

As has been noted frequently, there are no cultural indicators of quality of life that are in current usage. Palmer proposed that three dimensions need to be incorporated: cultural values, which may provide a frame work for evaluation; cultural processes, including the need to monitor and evaluate such things as connections between cultural clusters; and cultural products. These dimensions contribute to well-being and it is important that they are recognized in any quality of life model. Palmer also highlighted that there are problems in using numerical or quantitative approaches with cultural indicators. He suggested that the economic model is both inappropriate and inadequate, noting that an approach that resembled the environmental assessment models would be more appropriate.

- What training funding is needed?

Palmer acknowledged that skills in cultural planning seem to be acquired on the job. It is not yet recognized as a discipline at most universities. Most frequently it is inter-disciplinary and therefore hard to identify key competencies within the profession.

Cultural policy development at the level of the city-region

- Why are the cities latching on to the “creative cities” argument?

Palmer pointed out that the reasons differ in different places. For example, Singapore is worried about economic decline and competition, in other cities it seems to be more of an intuitive response on the part of politicians looking for opportunities for growth and development in the city.

- How is heritage playing into the “creative cities” argument?

The preservation of collective memory is not a process that is antipathetic to creative arguments. Palmer noted that a “sense of place”, even the “commodity of place”, are important areas for research.

- Are the leaders of cultural planning and policy those who can work horizontally?

Palmer noted that the development of cultural planning has required that practitioners acknowledge a growing number of multiple leadership models. He stressed that “cultural leadership” needs to be redefined as there is a clear distinction between management and leadership. Leadership requires a different set of competencies such as the ability to link across silos. In some respects Florida’s work was an attempt to think across silos, i.e. making links between gay populations and tolerance.