

THE ARTS AND CULTURE AS NEW ENGINES OF ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

Simon Brault

In Canada and elsewhere in the world the arts and culture have moved away from a position of marginality to being at the core of new economic development strategies. The vice-chair of the Canada Council of the Arts, Simon Brault, traces this evolution and notes that Canada has greatly increased its support of cultural industries, whose economic spin-offs are estimated to be \$26 billion. In spite of this, he writes, Canada is moving timidly in this field. We are still locked in a restrictive mode that is preventing us from taking full advantage of the potential of the arts and culture, which are incredible vectors of creativity, the principal driver of economic and social growth. He recommends a new cultural approach that will allow us to make "imaginative and promising links between education and culture, between health and culture, between citizenship and culture, between economic development and culture."

All around the world, the intrinsic virtues and the impact of culture on individual and community development are being questioned, studied, measured and, hopefully, rediscovered. There is a keen interest in the specific relationship between the arts and culture and the economic and social development of our communities.

A little less than 60 years after the adoption of Article 27 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which states unequivocally that everyone has the right "freely to participate in the cultural life of the community, to enjoy the arts and to share in scientific advancement and its benefits" and the right to "the protection of the moral and material interests resulting from any scientific, literary or artistic production of which he is the author," and at a time when the issue of cultural diversity is front and centre in the international arena, we are witnessing a profusion of analysis and discussion concerning the actions of the different levels of government in the area of cultural development.

In fact, there is so much discussion that it is difficult to keep track of all of it and to assimilate everything that is said, published or accomplished on the cultural scene. And there is no reason to believe that this passion for the arts and culture is a temporary phenomenon or one that interests only people in artistic and cultural fields. In fact, over the past two years, we have seen clear signs of a groundswell that goes far beyond the circle of specialists, whether in Europe, Africa or Canada.

Last year, for instance, almost 3.5 million people, including a large number of young people, converged on the city of Barcelona for a novel event that is likely to be repeated in years to come. Thousands of artists and intellectuals from Spain and around the world were invited to present hundreds of shows, exhibitions and conferences dealing with three main themes: cultural diversity, sustainable development and conditions for peace. During the 141 days it lasted, visitors were immersed in an atmosphere of festivities, reflection and dialogue aimed at making them aware of what they can accomplish at the dawn of this new century. A huge debate on the meaning and future of culture became the object of a popular demonstration.

A few months ago, in London this time, Tessa Jowell, British Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport, wrote an essay, almost a manifesto, entitled "Government and the Value of Culture," that drew considerable comment in the British press. In it, she argues that politicians systematically revert to instrumentalist arguments when it comes to justifying the State's support for artists, or for the arts in general. While recognizing at the outset that art and culture do have a real impact other than giving joy to those they touch, the British minister made a plea in favour of reasserting the essential contribution the arts can make to the growth of creativity and the rise of the free will that may be found in all human beings, regardless of origins and status.

Here in Canada, the debate on new cultural issues has begun in earnest. Questions normally addressed in universities and in the corridors of power are now discussed by cul-

tural leaders and by those who make up our new, vibrant and increasingly influential civil society.

And although public debate generally continues to revolve around our insatiable health, education and security needs, we note that cultural issues are no longer relegated to the fringe. What is the reason for this?

The status of arts and culture in society and the attention given to heritage have evolved dramatically since the adoption of Article 27 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

While it is true that our approaches, discourses and practices are still imbued,

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and far too much so, by certain perceptions of arts and culture which navigate between elitism (Art with a capital “A” which should only be accessible to educated and receptive minds), romanticism (art created by inspired artists who are suffering, misunderstood, and inevitably underpaid), and utilitarianism (art that feels good, that cures all ills, that distracts us from life’s hardships or that generates short-term profits), we are witnessing a questioning of the very foundations of the apriorisms that too often replace real reflection.

We must bear in mind that in the space of a few decades, we went from a situation where artistic and cultural creation, production and distribution almost completely eluded the realm of economics to one where they are at the very heart of new development strategies fostered or dictated by the globalization and primacy of technology and knowledge in the reconfiguration of our economies. Canada has certainly not been immune to this phenomenon, whose impact is still difficult to measure.

In the early 1960s, our governments focused on the professionalization of the arts by affirming objectives of artistic excellence and by building major cultural institutions in urban centres and in the regions. At that time, public spending was directed at increasing cultural activity by investing in the work of professional artists. The democratization of art was seen — understandably — as a primary responsibility of the state and it justified the gradual implementation of the cultural subsidy mechanisms we have today, of which the Canada Council for the Arts, established in 1957, remains the most eloquent example.

Unfortunately, efforts to develop these public support systems have been accompanied by statements and attitudes that fed the notion that there was a welfare relationship, one of condescension, almost charity, between the people who manage the economy and the people responsible for artistic creation.

In the 1970s, with the collapse of whole segments of economic activity based on natural resources and the processing of these resources, the positive impact of art and culture on the growth of the workforce became evident. Cultural industries, big festivals and prestigious fairs and exhibitions that attract hundreds of thousands of people were now viewed as new levers of economic prosperity, especially in urban centres.

In the late 1980s, echoes of the American and European experiments in urban revitalization through culture reverberated in Canada. Art and culture were now routinely called to the aid of ailing downtown cores, deserted or overpopulated urban areas, or

neighbourhoods torn apart by violence and poverty. An awareness of the key role of the arts in the daily lives of the First Nations and of how much they contribute to the health and resilience of communities was also beginning to emerge.

In the late 1990s, ideas about creative industries and creative cities emerged first in Britain and then in several European countries, changing our understanding of the relationship between art, heritage, culture and the economy.

In 2002, the extensive media coverage of Richard Florida’s work on knowledge workers and the appeal of cultural life in major urban centres, including his famous bohemian index that establishes a correlation between the number of artists in a city and the development of the creative class, precipitated changes in North America, almost creating a trend. A fashion that, like all fashions, carries the very best and the very banal, the sophisticated and the commonplace, the significant and the flashy. Yet, the media buzz generated by his work drew the attention of many politicians from all levels of government and captured the imagination of business leaders.

Realizing that the essentially humanistic and democratic ideological foundations on which cultural strategies and tools were initially based could not in themselves guarantee cultural policies over the long term, the key cultural development players began to look at the sociological and economic impacts of artistic creation.

Over the past 25 years in Canada, we have developed many economic arguments to justify greater government support for the arts, for cultural industries and for the protection and development of our heritage, both tangible and intangible.

The three economic arguments most often invoked to justify the importance of cultural development strategies are job creation, tourism and increased tax revenue.

Since 2001-2002, in Canada, governments at all levels spent in the neighbourhood of \$7.1 billion in public funds to support 740,000 jobs (including 131,000 artists) and to protect economic spin-offs estimated at \$26 billion. It would be unreasonable to suggest that the traditional economic arguments be dropped.

Obviously, it would also be an exaggeration to claim that cultural discourse since the early 1980s has been primarily concerned with economic issues. Culture's contributions to identity, to a sense of belonging, to social cohesion, to democratic life and to international prestige have been mentioned in support of the development of a sector that 75 percent of Canadians consider to be important to their quality of life (Decima 2002).

But in anticipating the existence of direct links between art, culture and

creativity, the most enlightened cultural thinkers have begun to suggest that funding for the arts be pulled from the ghetto where it has been confined for too long. While arguing for a consolidation of the instruments already in place — arts councils and culture ministries — they have proposed imaginative and promising links between education and culture, between health and culture, between citizenship and culture, between economic development and culture, and so on and so forth.

Culture would then no longer be understood uniquely as a specific sector of activity with its own jobs, organizations, funding agencies, planning and regulation. Instead, it would be understood as what it is by definition — that is, a dimension of the lives of individuals and communities.

Human creativity, in all of its forms, is the prime driver of economic and social growth. This oft-repeated affirmation has been proven at every stage of humanity's development. Without new ideas, it is impossible to generate supplementary economic wealth, and to increase shared social capital.

This being the case, we must think of ways of developing this creativity, which we know is not entirely an inherited trait and one that manifests itself quite unevenly through history and along geographic lines.

The creativity of human beings, like that of organizations and especially that of cities and nations, is incubated, sustained, stimulated or provoked by the vibrancy, originality and authenticity of the artistic and cultural life that inhabits them.

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Alain Laforest, Tohu

The Falla in Saint-Michel, a new tradition at Tohu. According to Simon Brault, "Tohu illustrates the unparalleled power of the arts and culture to mobilize people and to spawn new development strategies that can respond to citizens' needs as well as community and socioeconomic concerns."

On the individual level, many scientific studies prove that a knowledge of dance develops several attributes of creative thought, including originality, fluidity and ability for abstraction. We know that theatre teaches us how to understand complex situations and incites us to reflect on the motivations of our fellow human beings, as well as honing our interpersonal skills. We also know that learning music increases the capacity for reasoning and makes use of the abstract thinking needed in mathematics.

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move away from conventional, predictable intellectual and physical behaviours.

The correlations documented by Richard Florida between development of the creative sector of the economy and the vibrancy, quality and diversity of a city's cultural scene confirm the conclusions of other studies conducted recently in England, Australia and Germany which affirm that the revitalization of an urban area must include beforehand an ambitious cultural project.

For example, in a report published in 2004 entitled "The Contribution of Culture to Regeneration in the UK: A Review of Evidence," researcher Bob Catterrall is cited as saying, "Culture, but not just its aesthetic dimension, can make communities, it can be a critical focus for effective and sustain-

able urban regeneration. The task is to develop an understanding of the ways — cultural and ethical — in which even the 'worst estates' can take part in and help shape the relics of their city (and society) as well as their locality. This is a massive challenge for academics, professionals, business and to government and — of course — citizens. But nothing less can work." This viewpoint is supported by the following statement by a municipal official, Robert Hughes: "My own blunt evaluation of regeneration programs that don't have a cultural component is that they won't work. Communities have to be energized, they have to be given some hope, they have to have the creative spirit released."

Here in Canada, a large number of communities, neighbourhoods

and urban areas need to be revitalized because they have been affected to some degree by environmental, social, demographic or economic problems. Culture can play a key role in the revitalization process and even serve as a catalyst for the forces of change in a community.

That is what we are seeing right now in Montreal in one of Canada's poorest neighbourhoods: St-Michel. On a piece of land bordering one of North America's largest urban landfills, an ambitious and original project is being carried out whose mission and results are clearly artistic, cultural, social, ecological and economic. The project, called Tohu, is located in the heart of the Cité des arts du Cirque, which already houses the headquarters of the Cirque du Soleil, artists' residences and the École nationale de Cirque.

Easily identifiable from its huge circular studio, Tohu is not only a place where shows are created and presented, it is also a cultural centre that decided to set down roots in the disadvantaged, multi-ethnic neighbourhood of St-Michel, which is already home to the only multinational cultural organization whose social and artistic mission is so consistent with that of Tohu. In its hiring practices, in its management, in its programs and in its participation in community life, Tohu seeks to reflect, integrate and foster the vibrancy that inhabits the youth of St-Michel.

Tohu illustrates the unparalleled power of the arts and culture to mobilize people and to spawn new development strategies that can respond to citizens' needs as well as community and socioeconomic concerns. Several surveys show that artists and leaders in the cultural community spontaneously enjoy a high level of credibility, especially with young people, regardless of their status. This credibility is a lever whose potential should not be underestimated. Now more than ever, arts and culture appear as the key to three basic skills: learning to be, learning to know and learning to live together.

The world is changing. Rapid social upheavals, massive migrations of people, more diversified communities, fewer cultural common references and preferences, the collapse of the hierarchy between art forms and between high culture and popular culture, the high value placed on learning and knowledge in the economic continuum and the inevitable reconfigurations of concepts of identity and nationality caused by technological advances are some of the factors to be taken into account as we consider the future.

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Policy, planning, investment and cultural spending arguments and approaches must now be readjusted.

It will be our duty to reinvent, expand, open up, reposition and refine the cultural systems, programs and tools we possess in order to meet the challenges of today and to stimulate the enormous human development potential that our fellow citizens rightly aspire to.

We are not talking here about starting from scratch, but rather about giving new impetus to cultural policies. Obviously, the federal, provincial and territorial governments, as well as their agencies and Crown corporations, are major players in the financing of artistic and cultural infrastructures and activities, and this situation is not going to change, even though the means and responsibilities of each of these entities will undoubtedly be modified.

However, authentic cultural development must necessarily engage citizens who no longer wish to be regarded as passive consumers of culture or as secondary players but who

instead want to be considered active participants in the cultural life of their city and their country. New cultural policies can no longer position citizens as being mere beneficiaries of proposed measures. They must take into account their needs, their potential and their capacity to become more creative and to contribute to the development of, without instrumentalizing, art and culture.

Freedom of artistic creation remains in fact the strongest bulwark against such instrumentalization, and Canada plays an exemplary role

in this regard. This having been said, much remains to be done to pay our artists more adequately and celebrate their freedom to create.

We are at a crossroads. We can continue to move forward timidly. We can continue to be on the defensive whenever it comes to justifying public expenditures and investments in cultural development. But this would be a strategic error, and the cost of this error will grow in the years to come as other countries, other regions and, in particular, other urban centres make other choices.

A new cultural position requires a new attitude that takes courage and vision. It also calls for the creation of new alliances between artists, citizens, economic and political decision-makers, the health and education sectors, and community entrepreneurs.

We are starting to react to changes in cultural policies, but this is not enough. We must now anticipate change. (Article translated from the French)

Simon Brault is vice-chair of the Canada Council for the Arts.