



THE CITY IN PRACTICE: INTERNATIONAL MODELS OF CULTURAL CITIES

**CONFERENCE
by Robert Palmer**

(MUSIC)

In the first movement of that concerto, the composer Alfred Schnittke offers a musical interpretation of our times. His theme was "culture". At first, he expresses harmony, and then the chaos, the anxiety and frustration that are often expressed in the cultures of our cities of today. The beginning of the 21st Century finds cities confused about how they should be governed and unable to deal with the many contradictory forces of contemporary culture.

Schnittke, as a composer and an artist, is expressing something. He is reflecting on our state of being. The visionary look is often something an artist can do better than most people. Perhaps at the next cultural summit in Montreal, a substantial voice should be given to some of those artists.

It has been many decades now that cities and towns all over the world have been talking about the role of culture and the systems and practices by which they try to manage it. Hundreds of people have stood on platforms such as this to tell their stories about Barcelona, Bilbao or Berlin, about Genoa or Glasgow, about Copenhagen, Chicago or Cologne.

My experience has been that although many of these stories about cities are partly true, and we certainly have a great deal to learn from one another, in many cases, cities have created mythologies about themselves that are not entirely true. You cannot discover the truth of a city through its flashy marketing campaigns and the images promoted by its tourist offices. The real culture of a city is not expressed in a glossy brochure for tourists. Every city contains its culture like the lines of a hand

No matter how culture in Montreal finally decides to organise itself, irregardless of the new structures that are put in place or which party wins the next election, Montreal will only succeed to develop its cultural life if it looks to its own reality, to its own identity, to its own distinctiveness.

It is frustrating to see many cities and the cultural activists, creators, artists, political leaders and others who influence a city's cultural policy use so much energy to tinker with unimportant detail and skirt around the main questions,

After many years of working in cities and different cities, I am convinced that one of the biggest problems of cultural policy making is not the lack of resources, the lack of commitment, the lack of structures or even the lack of policy coordination. One of the biggest problems is to do with an inability to formulate and to really understand the policy objective itself — culture. It is regrettable that in order to manage it, culture has been reduced to a focus on the arts, or redefined as a means of marketing a city or as leisure. This leads to a misunderstanding of the

role of culture. There is a chronic laziness in dealing with the phenomenon of culture, which has strong intellectual and moral implications. You do not build culture as you build a road or a park. It is the spiritual, inspirational, visionary and creative value of a cultural act, which remains its primary justification. Those cities that want to deal with this complex concept in any meaningful or lasting way must concentrate on cultural value as a core issue. I ask the question: what are the core cultural values of Montreal?

The real success and sustainability of cultural development in a city like Montreal will not depend on the building of a new concert hall or museum here or the support given to a theatre company or a musician there. And the vitality and growth of the city's cultural cannot be sustained by importing talent from elsewhere or by constructing theme parks and entertainment complexes. And success is certainly not to do with flashy posters or slick marketing campaigns or even with beautifying the city with contemporary art. A lesson learned by many cities is that culture is something that you cannot plan for or measure in the same way as transportation or housing or health. For this reason, it has to be conceived and led in a different way if it is to really impact on the quality of living in a city over a long period.

You cannot make inroads into improving cultural policy and practice without really taking into account the cultural dynamics of the city, the urban social networks that exist and the feelings and the emotions of the people who live and work there. European cities seem to have caught the essence of the aesthetics of culture and the importance of culture as a way of life more than North American cities. It would help ensure the very special quality of Montreal if this notion could be debated and discussed. What is culture for in this city?

When cities ask me to advise them on cultural policy, it is interesting that the first questions they ask are about the link between culture and economic development, between culture social problems, between culture and environmental improvement, between culture and tourism. These connections are important. Culture is enormously important to a city's economic and social development. But this is not the first question. The essence of culture is not only about commodity production or mass consumption or the re-organisation of culture as an industry. These are business values and marketing processes. The first question is not about these issues. They come later. The first question should focus on the notion of culture, not as something we consume, but as something we live for. Memory, place, community, identity, relationship, emotional fulfilment, intellectual enjoyment, creation, a sense of ultimate meaning. These are the subjects of the first question.

I have felt a kind of "dèjà vu" when reading the background papers for today. I've been involved in similar processes — very directly in Glasgow Scotland and in Brussels Belgium, and indirectly in several other cities such as Barcelona, Rotterdam, Stockholm and Belfast. Other cities are now struggling with how to deal with culture in newly designated metropolitan areas. For example, I can use the example of the city of Bilbao in Spain, known for the building of the new Guggenheim Museum designed by Frank Gehry; there has been the incorporation of the city of Bilbao and 34 other municipalities, and they have been experiencing enormous tensions as the city develops new approaches to cultural policy.

In France, there has been a very significant shift in recent years. In the early 1980's in France there was a move towards decentralisation spread among different territorial units. Twenty years later, the pendulum has swung towards amalgamations into what are called "communautés urbaines" or "communautés d'agglomération". While this reform seems interesting, experience is demonstrating that the reforms are posing many problems in generating healthy conditions for

the cultural sector. This is because cultural development does not depend solely on the formal mechanisms of the municipalities and the state, but rather on a genuine collaboration involving different political levels, cultural stakeholders and associations, different scales of infrastructure and a vast array of local initiatives. These French cities are having problems — such as Nantes which has combined 19 municipalities or Rennes, with a metropolis which combines 67 different municipalities. Lille Metropolis in the north of France is combining a staggering 87 municipalities. Each metropolitan area has gone about the process of examining its approach to cultural policy and strategy. Here are a few examples

Both Barcelona and Bilbao in Spain have gone about the process by implementing very decentralised approaches to developing their cultural strategies. They set up area or neighbourhood committees and developed a very wide network for consultation. These neighbourhood committees comprised architects and artists, local politicians and teachers, business people and ordinary residents. Each of the two cities have invested large resources in establishing this entirely decentralised approach.

In Bologna in Italy, the move to the formation of a unified metropolitan Council was combined with the creation of 18 city quarter councils, each presided over by a Deputy Mayor. Each Council set up area committees and anyone interested in a particular field was encouraged to join in the work.

likely to happen. The creation of metropolitan authorities in Italy did not succeed.

There was a similar experience in England in 1986, when Metropolitan County Councils, where major cities such as Manchester or Newcastle were combined with other towns around them. The result was a mess, and incredible jealousies and rivalries prevented any real cooperation on cultural matters. Culture can easily become a battlefield on which identity and autonomy are fought.

Talking about cultural battlefields, I should say a few words about my recent experience of Brussels.

For those of you who do not know Brussels, it is the capital city of Belgium. Brussels is both a city and a region, one of three regions in Belgium. As a country, Belgium has 3 official languages- French, Flemish and German. There are 5 levels of government and each level has its own responsibilities. Each of these levels of government is run by a coalition between 2 or 3 of the 6 main political parties. All that totals 90 possible permutations and combinations of political interests, intrigues and affiliations. And if this has not been enough, Brussels as a city has 18 independent and elected mayors who preside over their own 18 local administrations. Against this complexity, it makes Montreal a piece of cake..

Not all cities are as complicated as Brussels and there are some interesting cases of metropolitan areas that have developed cultural strategies where the processes have been relatively pain free. The scale of pain usually relates to the history of a city and relations and politics within it. It is really very difficult to compare one city to another.

The city of Rotterdam in Holland is in the final stages of developing a new cultural plan for its metropolitan area. Rotterdam has placed a great emphasis on improving its organising capacity on every level. They have done this first by formulating a very clear vision for the city, and by integrating all policy efforts — culture, urban spatial planning, transport, education, etc. Rotterdam seems to have created a competent authority with the right administrative structure. Even more important is the fact that the city of Rotterdam values and uses a number of strategic

networks, and encourages the mutual interaction between the different networks. Leadership of the cultural plan is shared between different partners. It is interesting to examine the management style of Rotterdam on a metropolitan level. The road to their success has been influenced by joint efforts and the ability of the authority to mobilize a great deal of knowledge and energy into developing innovative strategies and structures.

Another interesting example of a city working along similar line is Kirklees, a city that is located in the industrial belt of England, between Manchester and Leeds. The metropolitan area is very small, less than 500,000 people, and is made up of a collection of small towns. The largest town and administrative centre is called Huddersfield. Although the scales of Kirklees and Montreal are different, this English metropolitan area was the first to use what they called the "cycle of urban creativity" to develop its cultural strategy. The Mayor was a key figure in promoting a philosophy, which was based on a very simple principle. That is- it is not organisations that bring about cultural change; it is people. Regeneration is always people-based". The approach combined two themes: one was people-centred change; the other was creativity. The region's cultural plan is unlike any other I have seen, because culture is viewed not as a separate strand of policy, but as an integral part of all policies- economic, transport, environmental, physical planning, social policy and education. Similar to the approach now used by Rotterdam, the emphasis was on partnerships and networking.

The organisers of this conference have asked me to draw from international experience. But there is no recipe for success in managing the cultural life of a metropolitan area like Montreal. There is no rulebook. Many cities have gone through the process that you are going through. There have been disasters and successes. Cities and regions have learned from their mistakes the first time around, and now are adapting their processes and structures to do things differently. There may be no strict rules, but I believe that there are certain guiding principles. There are certain factors that are critical to the success of developing and implementing innovative and inclusive cultural policies, which have wide impact and can be sustained over time. It is interesting that most of these features are mentioned in a recent large-scale comparative study on the cultural capacity European cities. The study was carried out by EURICUR and evaluated 8 cities: Antwerp, Bilbao, Eindhoven, Lisbon, Munich, Rotterdam and Turin. The findings back up my experience.

I have found that there are several key factors that are critical to the success or failure of innovative cultural policy and planning.

Vision and Strategy

You need to start with a clear vision. Then you need to integrate the vision with a strategy to achieve it.

Strategic Networks

In a metropolitan context, there are usually three categories of network. Public networks, including local or metropolitan authorities in which different government levels and government bodies participate. Public-private networks in which there is also participation by entrepreneurs, corporations and businesses. And cultural networks which involve cultural organisations, arts activists, producers and artists. The challenge is to promote interaction both within and between these levels of networks and ensure that these networks complement and reinforce each other.

Leadership

There are different types of leadership, and the public, private or cultural sectors can offer this. My experience is that it makes no difference where the leadership comes from; the main thing is that there is some kind of leadership. Where it emanates from is of secondary importance. Nor does leadership reside exclusively in individuals. Leadership can be exercised by a group or an organisation or be collective. The important issue is that the leadership is strong and focussed and that others are prepared to follow it.

Political Support

Strong political commitment and support is an essential ingredient of success. If you don't have political will, you are in trouble, and the realisation of a strong cultural policy will be a very hard and rocky road. One of the biggest challenges is to develop political support.

The Role of the Artist

I refer here to the creators and the dreamers, to the visionaries and makers of culture. They must be central to our concerns. It is the act of creation that expresses, embraces and defines the soul of our society. It is those creators who can help us deal with daily experience in a transforming way. We must value those who can work outside and beyond categories, those who can encourage imagination and offer beauty, who can help us think about big questions, who can stir up the stagnant. A city without artists is a city, which has stopped dreaming.

Holistic Thinking

Cultural policy is the product of joined-up thinking. The great trend of the machine age was to break things down. We have inherited disconnected ways of thinking; culture is usually disconnected from other public policies. The great challenge is to find new ways to put the pieces together again. There is nowhere more important than in cities, which are wholes — and we need to manage cities as total systems, from transportation to education, from health to jobs. To get cities to work creatively, we should work holistically. Cultural policy and action must never be confined to a handful of arts events, however important these may be. Cultural policy must invade and interact with all forms of public policy. The creation of a new metropolitan structure can have culture at its heart, as a kind of glue that helps to bind the multiple identities and exploit the creativity of the city.

I have been told that today I am speaking to people who have a real interest in the cultural future of Montreal. That is a great privilege for me. But you can't really convince people by making speeches. You've got to do it, by working through all the impossibilities and imponderables, all the problems and the threats. If we are really serious about culture and its transformational power, we should not wait for great visions from great people, for they are in short supply. It is up to us to light our own cultured fires.

This appears to be an important moment in time for Montreal. You can either use that moment or allow it to pass.