

The Link Between: Culture and Sustainability in Municipal Planning

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Abstract: This article explores the link between culture and sustainability from a municipal planning perspective based on experiences at the City of Kelowna. It examines how culture has been integrated within municipal planning, and how sustainability is being woven within cultural planning practices. The process has just recently begun at the City of Kelowna but already the municipality has experienced a number of practical learning opportunities. The most pertinent examples show that culture is an integral component of long-term community sustainability.

Keywords: Sustainability, municipal cultural planning, cultural vitality, cultural resources, Kelowna

Résumé: Cet article explore les liens entre culture et développement durable dans une perspective de planification municipale en se basant sur le cas de la ville de Kelowna, en Colombie-Britannique, au Canada. Cet article illustre comment la culture a été intégrée dans les pratiques de planification urbaines et comment le développement durable s'est inscrit dans les pratiques de planification locale. Bien que les processus en soient à leur début à la ville de Kelowna, il n'en demeure pas moins que la ville a fait l'expérience de plusieurs opportunités d'apprentissage. Un exemple particulièrement saillant issu du cas démontre à quel point la culture est un aspect intégral du développement durable à long-terme de la communauté.

Mots clé: durabilité, planification culturelle municipale, vitalité culturelle, ressources culturelles, Kelowna

Over the past decade, cultural planning in North America has grown in importance thanks in part to the research of Richard Florida and Charles Landry. Both have written on the link between economic prosperity and the cultural vitality of cities. Most notably, Florida's 2002 book *The Rise of the Creative Class* emphasizes the importance of place to that segment of the population that drives the 'knowledge economy', or the new economy of ideas. Florida's 'creative class' chooses to live where culture thrives, communities are dynamic, and neighbourhoods are vibrant and

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Culture and Local Governance / Culture et gouvernance locale, vol. 3, no. 1-2, 2011. ISSN 1911-7469
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connected. Florida himself epitomized this trend when he moved to teach at the University of Toronto in 2007, a city which he called “the most international city in the world,” saying “it could one day compete with top-tier cities like New York and London” (in Roberts 2007)

British innovator Charles Landry has taken the importance of cultural development out of academia and into professional practice. His company, Comedia, provides consulting services to governments worldwide, focusing on how to revive economies through cultural activity. In 2000, he wrote *The Creative City: A Toolkit for Urban Innovators*, which has become a starting point for local governments seeking to exploit the best of what their community has to offer in the pursuit of cultural identity and economic prosperity. Although economic development is often the reason for governments supporting cultural planning, both writers acknowledge that culture is an inherent part of overall quality of life, helping to ensure a happy, prosperous, and connected community.

In terms of its own cultural development, Kelowna, British Columbia, was named a ‘Cultural Capital’ of Canada in 2004. This award placed culture more firmly on the municipal radar and offered the opportunity for cultural expansion thanks to the \$500,000 in matching funds that the award provided. Kelowna is a mid-sized city with a population of approximately 116,000 (2010), and is located a four-hour drive from Vancouver, and an eight-hour drive from Calgary. It is located in the centre of the Okanagan Valley, geographically separated from these two larger cities by mountains on either side. Although Kelowna is the main centre for the region, its geographical separation from the larger cities means that it is somewhat isolated from the cultural benefits of a larger metropolis.

Kelowna has a number of facilities that are remarkable for a community of its size. There is an architecturally interesting main library, the multi-purpose Rotary Centre for the Arts, the Kelowna Art Gallery, as well as four museums – all in the downtown Cultural District. Despite the opportunities these facilities provide, Kelowna is not known for its cultural vitality due mainly to three factors. First, thanks to the beauty of the landscape and proximity to Lake Okanagan, it is a recreation destination for tourists, which means the focus is more on recreation than arts, culture, and heritage. Second, it is a retirement community: an estimated 21% of the population is 65 and older, the oldest demographic in Canada. Third, it has a predominantly white demographic, with only 13.2% of the population claiming ethnic origin other than the British Isles or Europe (such as Aboriginal, South Asian, Arab, and South American) (Statistics Canada 2006).

Although none of these features means that culture cannot thrive, they are not demographics that lend themselves easily to creating “an energized city [that] is the place where creative, entrepreneurial and forward-thinking people from every walk of life, every class and every lifestyle want to be” (Florida 2010, p. 15). When Richard Florida visited Kelowna in September 2010, he identified the city as expensive, white, and old, with the city’s greatest challenge being to attract the educated 30-something demographic. Recognizing the importance of culture to long-term growth, City Hall is currently exploring the potential for creating a culturally dynamic community and improving the city’s cultural identity.

Municipal governments are perhaps best situated to shape community by regulating land use. Land use, such as zoning, is one area that provincial governments across Canada have placed in the hands of municipal authorities. It is for this reason that municipalities collect local property taxes, albeit only providing approximately 8% of all tax revenue in Canada. The majority, but certainly

not all, of the best practices for tying culture to development at the municipal level are through land use practices. This can range from locating art in public right of ways, to providing wide sidewalks that support community activity, to exchanging increased density in new developments for the provision of cultural amenities such as community meeting spaces.

As these examples illustrate, there are a number of ways which built form can be designed to incorporate cultural components. But before this will happen in an on-going way, culture needs to be recognized within municipal planning as one of the four pillars of sustainable development, alongside economic, environmental, and social factors. Including culture within the framework of sustainability recognizes the need to improve the quality of life in the broadest sense (Momer 2010). As cultural researcher Jon Hawkes (2001) has identified, “What most of us have known all along, and recent [quality of life] studies have affirmed is that there are many values informing our society that run counter to those based simply on the production of goods – that, instead, focus on good. These values need to play a stronger role in the design of public policy” (p. 12)

A significant step to ensuring culture as one of the four pillars of sustainability is to strengthen cultural planning policies in the municipality’s Official Community Plan (OCP). In British Columbia, every municipality (except Vancouver) is required to create an Official Community Plan with set goals and policies that determine the shape of growth. In Kelowna, we are working on a revision of the existing OCP that will reflect growth strategies for the next 20 years. In this OCP, the sustainability agenda is front and centre to ensure that the City is both in compliance with provincial greenhouse gas reduction goals and is meeting the mandate of City Council.

In the draft OCP, “Culture, Arts and Heritage” is a chapter unto itself, speaking to the heightened importance of these sectors in long-range planning. Although yet to be approved by Council, the draft OCP also includes policies such as: “Require cultural resource management to be integrated in the development and review of pertinent Area Structure Plans, Neighbourhood Plans, Sector Plans, Parks Plans and Transportation Plans” and “Support cultural service delivery in all areas of the city, particularly Urban Centres, and specifically by ensuring the provision of amenities.” In the draft OCP, culture has been recognized as part of community building. People will live in more compact neighbourhoods that are less car dependent *if* cultural amenities are included in development planning.

City staff also recently undertook the exercise of revising the existing Council Cultural Policy. Council policies are documents that Council and staff can refer to when making decisions and setting financial priorities. In the revised Council Cultural Policy, policies were written to integrate culture throughout related departments at City Hall. Through this Council policy, rather than a stand-alone activity, culture is brought into decision-making about land use, infrastructure, and City-owned properties. The inclusion of cultural planning throughout municipal departments is a way to solidify culture’s place in municipal planning.

Another a practical application with implications for culture has been City Council endorsing a “multiple bottom line” in the evaluation of all municipal infrastructure projects. The City has moved from the triple bottom line accounting model – economic, social, and environmental – to a multiple bottom line approach that includes cultural sustainability in its assessment of infrastructure projects. City Council may now prioritize infrastructure projects based on how well they address cultural priorities, as well as costs (economic sustainability), impacts on the environment

(environmental sustainability), and inclusion of social amenities such as affordable housing (social sustainability). When an infrastructure project is reviewed, it will be examined to see how well a project may support “connections to cultural infrastructure” and “the incorporation of public art,” two potential markers of cultural sustainability.

The fourth pillar of sustainability has also been brought into the creation of Kelowna’s sustainability checklists for new developments. Sustainability checklists have become a common method for municipal governments throughout British Columbia to assess the sustainability of new development projects. They are relatively simple tools used to measure the potentially positive and negative impacts of a new development. The sustainability checklist score is provided to Council during the development application review process. These new Council-endorsed four-pillar checklists give weight to all aspects of sustainability, albeit not necessarily equally. That said, the checklists have been designed so that cultural sustainability is given value. For example, the checklists consider whether a developer has incorporated design suggestions offered by the City’s design staff. Points are also awarded for a development proposal that incorporates public art and/or design features that enhance the public sphere, such as public green space, walkways, or fountains.

The value of culture as a dimension of sustainability has often been overlooked because it is hard to argue that ‘good design’, for instance, has a measurable value in the same way that an ‘energy-efficient heating system’ might. Whereas the latter can reduce the need for more power sources, the former may be seen as simply pleasing. However, these checklists quantify culture as part of creating a community that is livable and that, in the long term, will thrive. The inclusion of culture in the checklists offers the opportunity to educate developers, and the community in general, as to the importance of features such as good design as part of creating a place that attracts the people that Kelowna needs to continue to grow.

These examples outline how culture has been recognized as one of the four pillars of sustainability and is being integrated throughout Kelowna’s municipal planning practices. The importance of creating a livable, sustainable community cannot be underplayed given global impacts on all communities, including climate change and job loss from offshore manufacturing. While the first part of this article has explored how culture is being integrated within Kelowna’s planning practices, the latter part of the article will explore the complementary inverse: making cultural planning itself a sustainable practice.

In the spring of 2010, Kelowna began work on a new cultural plan. The first step was to interview key community leaders to determine successes and gaps. The one issue that came up repeatedly is the need for collaboration: collaboration between non-profit arts organizations, for-profit enterprises (i.e., wineries), government, and recreational events (i.e., Kelowna’s very successful Apple Triathlon). Inherently, the community has said that culture itself needs to be regarded as a sustainable activity, where partnerships and cooperation are the main means of ensuring its survival in this mid-sized, recreation- and retirement-oriented community. Similar to how preserving a wetland requires examining the surrounding landscape, preserving culture’s longevity and prominence requires a sensitivity and appreciation of the surrounding terrain to ensure its place in the landscape. Although this analogy may seem trite, it is not meant to be. The following examples may help support this perspective.

Today, Kelowna is well known as a wine-producing community. However, although grapes were first planted in the region in 1860, winemaking is a much later addition to the rural economy. The economic heritage of the community is livestock, beginning in the late 1800s, and then fruit production (apple, cherry, and apricot orchards) beginning in the early 1920s. Today, approximately 48% of all land in Kelowna rests within the Agricultural Land Reserve, an agricultural land base that is protected for food production by provincial legislation.

Agriculture in Kelowna is a fascinating lynchpin of sustainability and culture. In the City's *Strategic Plan*, agriculture is identified as central: "Kelowna is a vibrant city where the *agricultural* and beautiful natural setting, community spirit, economic stability, and stewardship of the environment enhance the quality of life for residents" (emphasis added). Agriculture is the foundation for the society that grew here and encompasses all four pillars of sustainability, including the cultural. Despite its importance, every year landowners and developers exert pressure to remove parcels of agricultural land from the Agricultural Land Reserve for non-agricultural uses deemed to be more profitable. How a cultural plan can support this incredibly valuable resource is debatable, but through the cultural planning process it has been recognized as both an under-promoted part of Kelowna's identity and an indicator for how Kelowna can move into the future. One of the recommendations that the community has repeatedly stated is the need to ensure a local farmer's market, which is seen as a cultural amenity, in downtown Kelowna. If successful, a downtown market would be an important move to tie the rural to the urban, and highlight the interdependence of both.

Finally, a somewhat modest example of how sustainability is being integrated into cultural planning practice. Recently, the City purchased a property as part of expansion plans for the City-managed airport. One of the airport staff contacted me, the culture and heritage planner, about a number of agricultural outbuildings which may have heritage value (see Figure 1). I visited the site with a local heritage contractor who assessed the materials

**Figure 1. Buildings at
4310 Old Vernon Road, Kelowna, BC**



of the buildings. Although the outbuildings had no significant heritage value, some of the wood could be used in construction work at a number of other City-owned agricultural heritage sites. The end result was four City departments working together to ensure that the wooden construction materials, some of them quite rare, were saved and stored for future conservation work at other sites.

Although perhaps only a very small success story, to me it echoes much more. If nothing else, sustainability requires recognition of the interdependence of the many parts that make up a vibrant, living, healthy whole. When so many parts of a local government can work effectively together to salvage and preserve a valuable cultural asset, it is a promise of future endeavours that can work to sustain a vibrant, living and healthy Kelowna on a grander scale.

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