

IS CULTURE TRULY THE FOURTH PILLAR OF SUSTAINABILITY???

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There is a steady cultural advancement in Canada of citizens, organizations and government rallying behind the vision of building a more creative society-- one that celebrates and supports vibrant, sustainable towns and cities, and brings a sharper focus to the creative and knowledge-based economy. Forward-thinking community planners and designers over the past decade have regularly shared their growing endorsement of the central role of Culture as a builder and driver of creative, dynamic and attractive communities.

This new approach begins with the understanding that Culture and Sustainable Development are inextricably linked. It promotes this fruitful relationship from two perspectives: firstly, through development of the cultural sector itself --such as creativity, cultural industries and cultural tourism--and secondly, by ensuring that culture has its rightful place in all public policies--- particularly those related to education, the economy, science, communication, environment, social cohesion and international cooperation. 1

In response to these directions from global and national levels, many municipalities across Canada are currently engaged in developing their own Cultural Plans, typically through efforts that are municipally-led and community-driven. In some communities, Cultural Mapping projects are underway, while other towns and cities have included a section on Culture or Creative Community in their Official Plans, Strategic Plans and Economic Development statements.

This is because we all know that Economic, Social, Environmental, and Cultural are recognized as the four pillars of sustainability... Or are they?

In December 2003, former British Columbia Premier Mike Harcourt was appointed by then-Prime Minister Paul Martin to Chair the External Advisory Committee on Cities and Communities. The Advisory Committee presented its report to the Prime Minister, outlining key findings and recommendations fundamental to the growth and vitality of cities and municipalities across Canada. Greater attention to culture as the 'fourth pillar' of sustainability is found in the work of the Committee, which charts a path for realizing that vision.

A core recommendation in the final report, From Restless Communities to Resilient Places ² released in 2006, was the need for Canadian municipalities to embrace 'Four Pillars' or dimensions of sustainability – economic prosperity, social equity, environmental sustainability and cultural vitality--as their overarching planning framework. The Committee went further to state that Culture was in fact the 'glue' binding together the other three, providing the sense of shared identity and purpose needed to tackle challenges together. Culture helps build social capital and contributes to vitality and resilience in communities.

The disappointment is that a decade later we still have not arrived at the point of universally recognizing Culture as the fourth pillar in Canada. And most surprisingly, the uncertainty appears to emanate from senior government agencies and organizations, and the Federation of Canadian Municipalities.

At the County of Lambton, Council authorized the Cultural Services Division to undertake a Municipal Cultural Plan in 2011. The process included extensive community engagement, with the final report approved by County Council now being implemented.

Once the Cultural Plan was complete, Lambton then followed the 'best practice models' to undertake an Integrated Community Sustainability Plan (ICSP). But in their funding guidelines, FCM doesn't recognize Culture as the Fourth Pillar of sustainability 3, and when asked for explanation, staff indicate that the role of Culture is included within the Social pillar. 4

Unfortunately, this dated model has been adopted by the Association of Municipalities of Ontario (AMO) to guide their province-wide series of instructional 'Leading with Sustainability' workshops, 5 which further undermines the four-pillar model. But the more basic three-pillar approach contravenes the direction of the Harcourt Commission in both spirit and direction, and presents municipalities with a quandary.

It also ignores a 2010 Policy Statement from the III World Congress of Cities and Local Municipalities. Specifically, the World Congress recommended that municipalities exercise a number of actions to ensure that culture is embedded as the fourth pillar of sustainable development. It encourages local municipalities to:

- *develop a solid cultural policy
- *integrate the dimension of culture into all development policies
- *include a cultural dimension in all public policies
- *promote the idea of culture as the fourth pillar internationally

The Congress then called on national governments to:

- *bring a cultural perspective to national development plans as a whole
- *establish concrete objectives and actions concerning culture in areas such as education, the economy, science, communication, environment, social cohesion and international co-operation
- *promote the idea of culture as the fourth pillar internationally.6

There is an element of irony to this firm support for Culture from the international community: many municipalities in Canada find the lack of national agreement and leadership inconsistent with the fact that Canadian towns and cities have been recognized as amongst the world leaders in development and implementation of local cultural plans.

Part of the confusion may arise because FCM's Integrated Community Sustainability Plans were created to be part of a process, funded by the Federal Gas Tax, to address infrastructure deficit

such as brownfields, waste and water management. And to further complicate the Canadian situation, Ontario municipal Cultural Plans continue to be viewed as a step removed from the overall ICSP process, while other provinces have embraced the integration of this valuable tool.

This results in several competing models of sustainability, leaving local officials and politicians alike bewildered by inconsistent messages received from the federal government, staff of Provincial Ministries and FCM on the integration of Culture into the principles of sustainability. The FCM template for funding proposals for ICSP projects indicates only token recognition of Culture.

Even more concerning, some smaller municipalities --in the absence of either a Strategic Plan or a local Cultural Plan--propose to adopt the three-pillared ICSP information as the sole integrated umbrella plan for that community. ⁷ But overlooking Culture as a pillar of the Sustainability model is ultimately a dis-service to the community, potentially limiting its range of 'quality of life' options and economic opportunities well into the future.

The balance of international thinking and current Canadian municipal leadership emphatically supports the four pillars of sustainability for municipalities. This consensus should be equally supported and communicated by the federal government, FCM and other bodies. Municipalities deserve and will benefit from the clarity and consistency that is currently lacking.

In the absence of clear federal leadership, municipalities have started thinking about other solutions and partnerships. One idea recently floated is the development of (for example) a Canada-Ontario Cultural Agreement similar to the concept and funding approach used to develop the Local Immigration Partnerships, by which some cities are becoming directly involved in immigrant attraction and settlement.

Such a high-level agreement would recognize and clarify the integrative role played by Culture for the development of creative communities. It would focus on the need for consistent application of Municipal Cultural Planning principles, inviting leverage of local resources to help attain local goals.

Municipalities have every right to define culture in their own terms, and that will be different from town to town and region to region. What should not be a matter of uncertainty is the recognition of Culture as one of the key Four Pillars of sustainability for municipalities.--that should be a consistent theme from federal bodies, and warrants being a firm parameter of all future funding for Sustainability studies.

The many values and partners of the Cultural sector —libraries and digital literacy, arts groups, creativity and innovation, leisure organizations, youth activities, sports and recreation, strong neighbourhoods, historic downtown districts, appealing public places and spaces, local food, social vibrancy, festivals and events --and all others involved in rethinking and reshaping dynamic communities—are key to cities and towns competing successfully in the global economy.

Canada's municipalities have achieved some impressive work in Cultural Planning; we need to continue to advance our vision and see this role of international leadership expand. The federal government, its agencies, and FCM, need to get on board. Quickly. Culture represents too important a tool for building strong, healthy and exciting communities to leave to passing reference.

Canada needs to buy into the model of Culture, Economic, Environment and Social as the four pillars of sustainability for Canada's towns and cities. They are each fundamental to building vibrant, prosperous and successful municipalities in the 21st century.

1 United Cities and Local Governments, Culture: Fourth Pillar of Sustainability, 2011; p.4
[http://www.cities-localgovernments.org/upload/doc_publications/9890675406_\(EN\)_culture_fourth_pillar_sustainable_development_eng.pdf](http://www.cities-localgovernments.org/upload/doc_publications/9890675406_(EN)_culture_fourth_pillar_sustainable_development_eng.pdf)

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²² External Advisory Committee on Cities and Communities (2006). *From Restless Communities to Resilient Places*. Infrastructure Canada.

3. A search of the FCM website on June 5 2012 for the word 'Culture' returned 10 results.

4. See the FCM Sustainability Community Awards introduction, <http://fcm.ca/home/awards/fcm-sustainable-communities-awards.htm>, and in conversation with FCM office staff.

5. Content from the AMO 'Leading with Sustainability' Workshop in London, Ontario, May 25, 2012

6. [http://www.cities-localgovernments.org/upload/doc_publications/9890675406_\(EN\)_culture_fourth_pillar_sustainable_development_eng.pdf](http://www.cities-localgovernments.org/upload/doc_publications/9890675406_(EN)_culture_fourth_pillar_sustainable_development_eng.pdf)

7. In conversation with several Councillors registered at Creative Cities Canada Conference 2011, London, Ontario.

Gord Hume is a leading voice on building creative, prosperous communities. He is the author of three books, including “Cultural Planning for Creative Communities” and is a sought-after speaker on municipal issues.

Robert Tremain heads Lambton County Cultural Services, an integrated Division which includes Libraries, Museums, Archives, Theatre and the new ALIX Art Gallery. Following its Municipal Cultural Plan in 2011, Lambton established a Creative County Committee to leverage community projects that celebrate County identity. Lambton has recently completed an Integrated Community Sustainability Plan, which firmly endorses the four-pillar model.

The Four Pillars of Sustainability

