Culture and Infrastructure in Kamloops: Implications of the Small Cities Initiative for Atlantic Canada*

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Introduction

In February 2002 over three hundred people attended the opening of three new exhibitions at the Kamloops Art Gallery: a survey of works by nationally known painter Takao Tanabe, “Tapestry Gardens,” a solo show by local artist Tricia Selmer and 40 small pieces by members of the Kamloops Water Media Artists. This combination embodied the gallery’s commitment to showing historical and contemporary work and to programming aimed at community involvement. The number of visitors may seem small relative to a vernissage at a large institution but they are significant for the gallery and for Kamloops, as the city’s population is just over 80,000.

This level of participation is one indicator that calls attention to cultural participation in a small city. Traditionally, and increasingly so in Canada, when we think of cities, we think big: Toronto, Montreal, Vancouver. We might include Calgary, Winnipeg and several urban centers, such as Ottawa, whose populations have swelled as a result of amalgamation. The small city, with a population between 50,000 to 150,000, often goes unnoticed, even to many who live there, as eyes fix on megacities in Canada and abroad, or to smaller places and rural areas at the other end of the continuum.

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Yet Kamloops has much to tell about cultural life in the small city to the extent that it is currently the site for a multi-year and multi-faceted initiative called “the Cultural Future of Small Cities. What follows is an account of why and how it emerged and a look at its conceptual aspects, various components and work to date with the intent of suggesting implications for cities of comparable size in Atlantic Canada. Before continuing one qualification is in order. The focus is on implications, not applications. This is not just because the initiative has only completed its first year of activity; it is also an acknowledgement of the differences in regions and cities, large or small. Moreover, the vast literature on economic, social and cultural development continues to be strewn with applications of models and formulae without little or no sensitivity to local conditions or history. This is not to suggest that there are no “best practices,” or no possibilities for adaptation. It is to recognize the complex interplay of similarities and differences from the outset. On a personal note, I am particularly attuned to these circumstances, having been born and raised in Cape Breton and witnessed too many attempts at superimposing industrial models on the island that have left its historically depressed economy even more vulnerable and many of its people more demoralized.

The Small Cities Initiative

So to Kamloops. It is located in the southern interior of British Columbia in the Thompson- Nicola region, about four hours east of Vancouver on the Transcanada Highway to Calgary and two hours north of Kelowna in the Okanagan Valley, which it is often compared to or confused with to the chagrin of both cities. This relative isolation is one of Kamloops’ virtues and certainly, in the case of the arts, as it is just too far to make frequent trips to large cities to satisfy one’s cultural diet. Yet isolation is not the sole condition for sustainability. There is a degree of local involvement that seems to come from more than the city’s geographical location, so much so that for over twenty years it has had several thriving arts organizations such as the Kamloops Art Gallery, Western Canada Theatre and the Kamloops Symphony Orchestra.

It was this appreciation of time and place that led the Kamloops Art Gallery KAG to initially approach other arts organizations, the University College of the
Cariboo UCC, the City of Kamloops and several social organizations to ask why the arts and culture flourish in Kamloops and how this can continue. The first meeting could have easily become an exercise in self-congratulation or worse still a case of going against the cherished maxim if it’s not broke, don’t fix it. Yet it marked the beginning of an opportunity for collaborative and comprehensive exploration. As Jann Bailey, the Director of the Kamloops Art Gallery put it so aptly: “We are all doing it well but not together.” 2000 Given this observation, the participants immediately recognized that they were beginning with a knowledge and appreciation of Kamloops’ diverse cultural resources, as opposed to its deficiencies and drawbacks, thus possessing the fundamentals for what Kratzmann and McKnight 1993 term "asset-building community development." Yet the participants were also being asked to consider what might be further possible by working together and sharing resources. This led to a consideration, from the very outset, of the very purpose of collaboration for the partners and the community of Kamloops.

(Ver the next year consultations and discussions led to the emergence of a research and community-based initiative to examine cultural life in Kamloops within the context of its implications for cities of comparable size in British Columbia, Canada and abroad. With eventual support from the Community-University Research Alliance program of the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada and local funders, “The Cultural Future of Small Cities” became a reality. Now beginning its second year its initial and continuing partners are: Kamloops Art Gallery lead, University College of the Cariboo, City of Kamloops, Forest Research Extension Partnership, John Howard Society, Kamloops Museum and Archives, Secwepemc Cultural Education Society, Stuart Wood School and Western Canada Theatre.

The initiative has four intentionally overlapping thematic areas: 1 City, regional and environmental planning, 2 Local history and heritage, 3 Linking cultural resources to social development and 4 Representing Kamloops. Each contains research projects, that involve one or more partners and some of these currently are: a biographies of major city streets b correlations between culture, health and well-being, c the child’s conception of home and place, d place promotion and e research related to the
development of a children's area in the Kamloops Museum. Each project has relative autonomy yet there is constant intermingling as the initiative as a whole addresses culture in the small city.

To further ensure continuity and knowledge sharing all researchers and community partners meet formally on a regular basis. There is also a strong student component with UCC students engaged as research assistants, in work-study projects or as interns in community organizations. There are several public activities including the publication of a newsletter and two culminating events slated for 2004: an exhibition at the Kamloops Art Gallery and other venues that will document the work of the projects and The Small Cities Forum. It will take place over a week and include presentations, panels, workshops, design charrettes and cultural events that will address the cultural, social and economic challenges facing small cities. The forum hopes to attract city politicians, administrators and planners as well as academics, students, heads of non-profit organizations and citizens from British Columbia, Canada and abroad.

Initial Explorations

With the initiative now in its second year, it’s becoming more evident how we are understanding and engaging culture both materially and organizationally and what will shape future work and the cultural future of small cities from the vantage point of Kamloops.

Cultural Assets

Kretzman and McKnight’s notion of asset-building community development continues to inform the initiative, as the research projects proceed and, and in some cases, more local groups and organizations become involved. To illustrate, over the past year geography professor Ross Nelson and UCC students have focused on the biography of a street project on Tranquille Road, the main thoroughfare in the city’s north shore which is going through an economic transition. This research has fed into two design charrettes, which were organized by the city of Kamloops and included the involvement
of two local groups, the North Shore Business Improvement Association and the North Shore Residents Association. Among other things, the charrettes looked at the creation of cultural facilities in two sites, in one case artists’ spaces as part of a mixed use development in a previously contested parcel of land adjacent to Tranquille Road, in another the development of a performing arts center in a lot formerly occupied by a tire company. The research and the design charrettes are the very beginnings of a cultural planning process that from the outset has been inclusive both with respect to who’s participating and what are regarded as a city’s assets and infrastructure.

Cultural Expression

Another component of a city’s assets and a determinant of what counts as infrastructure is its heritage. Accordingly, several research projects are documenting Kamloops’ cultural past and present and artists are involved in these investigations or in phases of other projects. In some instances, the artist is working closely with a researcher and community partner, becoming in effect a co-researcher who will produce work that is an integral part of the study. In others, the artist is an observer who will make a new work or contribute an existing one in response to a specific research agenda. In all cases, the works are intended to part of the culminating exhibition at the art gallery and other venues in 2004. To illustrate the Representing Kamloops theme now features a community mapping project that includes art-as-research. Professor Will Garret-Petts, a researcher and co-director of the small cities initiative during its first year, explains:

It is part traveling art exhibition, part social science study of narrative attachment to place, the project integrates forms of artistic inquiry and representation traditionally excluded from formal research. Community members are being asked to construct “memory maps” detailing their attachment to Kamloops landmarks, both public and private. These visual representations form the “pretext” for oral narratives, opportunities to tell the story or stories of belonging and alienation. The memory maps and the stories are collected, documented, and displayed in exhibition format; and with each new collection the exhibit changes and grows. In concert with the gathering of images and narratives, artist-researcher Donald Lawrence, together with a team of students, has constructed a sculptural map of Kamloops. The map, a maquette for a room-sized final version, provides topographical landscape of space, while the narratives provide a collective story of place. The final result will be a merging of the two,
where the images and oral texts are embedded into the sculpture and placed on public display in the Kamloops Museum. Dubinsky and Garrett-Petts 2002, in press

Cultural Participation

The engagement of artists and/or citizens as researchers is not confined to smaller places as the work of a yden 1997 and others in public history demonstrate. Yet surely the advantage of mining, making and celebrating history within in a small city is one of scale in that the whole community can be involved to a degree and in potentially diverse ways. In the case of the biography of streets project, for example, both artists and local residents are engaged in the cultural planning process. Their involvement is also part of a larger phenomenon of participation. As indicated at the outset, one of the factors that led to the emergence of the small cities initiative was the proportionally high degree of involvement by people in Kamloops as organizers, producers, consumers and volunteers. Thus, participation is becoming an increasing focus with some researchers, for example, and as Berger 1995 suggests, exploring the relationship between the cultural i.e., symbolic choices that people make and the social locations in which they take place. Such attention is one way of asking what civic engagement really means and what it takes culturally be an “intelligent community,” to use Peter Katz’s term 2000 for a city that is livable and economically sustainable.

The Culture of Participation

The small cities initiative itself is a microcosm of cultural participation in Kamloops for we are a diverse group of people including staff of arts organizations, a social agency, a First Nations society, and a business group, university researchers and students, elementary school children and teachers, city of Kamloops staff and local residents. ow we collaborate, but also conflict, are being documented and assessed in order to further understand the dynamics of participation that go into creating and sustaining cultural life in a small city. The very idea of what makes a community remains central to how we work as an entity and in particular how the initiative is working as a community-university alliance. As Will Garrett-Petts explains:
........we are beginning to appreciate the implications of art gallery
director Jann Bailey’s initial observation that local individual arts
and cultural organizations were working “well, but not together.”
Community-university research alliances like the small cities initiative
bring communities together in ways that make all partners productively
self-conscious about community development in general— and about
the shape and purpose of “research” in particular. Working together,
however, means more than establishing shared projects and goals; it
also means understanding and negotiating otherwise hidden assumptions,
procedures, and agendas. Partnerships, however well intended, involve
some measure of gain and some measure of loss—that is, all those
participating are beginning to recognize that we need to work differently
if we are to work well and together. Dubinsky and Garrett-Petts 2002, in press

Implications for Atlantic Canada

What does the this work in Kamloops have to do with Atlantic Canada? Why fill
the pages with experiences way out west? As emphasized at the outset the intent is not to
offer formulae but to share knowledge and to consider the course of cultural development
here and elsewhere. )ere, br iefly, are four implications of our work to date.

1. (ne key factor that contributed to starting the Kamloops initiative was the very
recognition of it as a small city, and as noted, one that is relatively isolated. Small cities
in Atlantic Canada may not be as remote geographically but there are several of them -
St. John’s, Moncton, Saint John, and to a lesser degree, in terms of population,
Fredericton, Sydney and Charlottetown. That these cities have remained small, i.e. not
over 150,000 and not become mid-size, such as )a lifax, may be regarded as a lack of
economic progress. Yet smallness is increasingly becoming a virtue. As we are
discovering in Kamloops, this kind of scale has a better chance of translating into more
livability, and especially as large cities continue to expand and are beset by more sprawl.
New Brunswick, in particular, is fortunate. Its three principal cities are nicely spaced
apart, far enough to be autonomous and self-contained and near enough for commuting
and exchange. The triangle can ensure that capital and services are not concentrated but
dispersed, making for a situation in which culture can benefit from and contribute to,
evident, for example, by the restoration, various offerings and proximity of the Capitol
Theatre in Moncton.
2. (ne must be careful, however, about making too much out of isolation and smallness as the flip side is parochialism. This is often hard to resist, and especially in Atlantic Canada. So much has been made already, and particularly in tourism promotion, of related traits, such as its quaintness and innocence, what Ian Mackay describes so well as the “quest of the folk.” in the case of Nova Scotia. 1994 This is not to take away from the rich forms of cultural expression, such as the celtic revival in Cape Breton or traditions elsewhere in the region. Yet as McKay points out, there is little said about class, ethnic history and economic and industrial circumstances in the official cultural portrait of Nova Scotia. Increasingly, historical realities are being recognized, if not readdressed, given the recent designation of Africville as a national historic site. However, there is still long way to go with respect to examining the past and recognizing that cultural tensions and differences are enabling factors of social and economic development. Kamloops’ situation is similar given its multiple and complex histories. Like Atlantic Canada, the challenge is to address these legacies and to explore how the local and the vernacular, both present and past, relate to, are influenced by and are an alternative to cosmopolitan and global forces.

3. Whether the focus is local history for itself or as a feature, for example, of cultural tourism, we are learning that cultural planning and community development, and particularly with respect to the arts, can not succeed on their own. This is not just a matter of having sustained financial and institutional support, although this is obviously essential, but of involving a diversity of individuals, groups and organizations. Who and what entities to encourage is a complex issue and process as it not always a matter of people and organizations coming forward. There are also various intentions, choices and agenda to consider and invariably there will be complaints of exclusion despite one’s best efforts. Indeed, these realities keep reminding us of an observation by Lucy Lippard as a result of her chronicling of and participation in community-based art practice. As she put it: "Community doesn't mean understanding everything about everybody and resolving all the differences; it means knowing how to work within differences as they change and evolve" 1995, p. 127. Still, there has to be a starting point. In our case it was
the Kamloops Art Gallery and UCC building on their links and approaching other partners, some obvious, such as the theatre company, others initially unapparent, such as the John Howard Society and a forest research group.

4. It is the unapparent together with some risk-taking and what Jerome Bruner so aptly calls “disciplined intuition” that are integral to the “working well and working differently” that Will Garret-Petts described earlier. Yet they are the kind of ingredients that are usually subject to local conditions and possibilities be they in Kamloops, or in small cities, or even smaller communities, in the Atlantic region. In our experience, they have become part of the everyday administrative give and take and are also contributing to opening up new routes of inquiry, such as the engagement of artists as researchers. As Will Garrett-Petts explains further “artistic practice—and the presence of working artists—offers the possibility of well-crafted critique, playful destabilization, and an identifiable “third view,” one not tied directly to either the university or the community partners.” 2002, in press. As for Atlantic Canada, the purpose, participants, forms and spaces for cultural collaboration may vary, as the diverse program of this conference suggests. But wherever the place there will hopefully be a desire to reach across many divides to help ensure the cultural future of small cities.

Bibliography


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