

Mapping Cultural Stimulus: New Community Terrain

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Rather than locating culture in a fixed place, like a gallery or a museum, this paper argues that it is to be found in the interstices. In astronomical terms, culture isn't the stars: it is the 'dark matter' that binds and makes up most of our existence. To take the analogy further, culture is the invisible without which there is nothing(ness).

TWENTY2 POINTS

No story is too small.

The financial stimulus package doled out to the wealthiest sector of our society is enough to make one weep. The bailouts of proud capitalists who moan about government intervention, yet come crying for help when their corruption is laid bare, creates a serious disconnect within culture.

Transition houses are bursting at the seams. Food banks are running at capacity. Vandalism is spiking. Mental health agencies & crisis lines & family services are all seriously stretched. What's missing? How about a discussion around a stimulus package intended for the front lines of communities?

We need a form of stimulus that percolates from within communities. A form of cultural stimulus.

Cultural stimulus is a series of micro-engagements within a community across a wide range of social, cultural and economic inputs. It begins with a scouting, charting & mapping of ground level community activity, seeking entry points and aiming at stimulating action through the formation of creative partnerships.

The tensions, knots and conflicts located within communities, are where stimulus must be applied.

Creative partnerships need mechanisms through which to bring diverse interests together. Social agencies, cultural groups and economic organizations may not traditionally have a shared language through which to dialogue. Thus an interface is required. There is no better interface to foster cross-sector dialogue than the arts.

Culture, in its broadest sense, is the pattern formed by the social, economic, environmental, scientific, political and artistic pursuits of societies. On one level it is highly visible, but often times culture is animated and motivated by what might be referred to as the 'dark matter' or 'dark energy' of communities.

Science informs us that the visible universe is only a small fraction of what comprises space. By observing the behaviour of what is observable - stars, galaxies, quasars, pulsars - it is known that other forces are at work, influencing what we see. Science suggests that a 'dark matter' (or 'dark energy') is present. Something unseen is influencing the seen.

This is an excellent metaphor for culture. We know that the observable aspects of our society are in large part influenced by dynamics and factors of an 'unseen culture' – the complex spectrum of micro influences contained within the unpredictable web of social networks, family dynamics, genetics, personal experiences, memories, dreams, etc. These influences combine to result in buried and hidden physical, emotive, intellectual, or spiritual animations. These animations are the dark matter of culture.

Statistics are the visible aspects of society. To break down the components of statistics will reveal the stimulus points (or entry points) for mapping and exploring the new community terrain of dark matter.

Creative partnerships (as a form of cultural stimulus) are best fostered by asking, "What can I do to assist you with your mission? How can I value-add to what you do already?" Service & Compassion are essential qualities.

No one sector of society can do it alone. Public, Private and Civil Society sectors must operate seamlessly.

The key is to understand the relationships between social, economic and cultural development.

Cities are networks of communities. Communities are networks of neighbourhoods.

Education is a central entry point. Future 'Creative Studies' (i.e. the Arts) must be embedded within each field of research – no Degree should be granted without a component of Creative Studies. This approach will pay dividends as we work to improve the research and development base in our country and compete within the creative economy.

A key factor in the knowledge economy and the link between productivity and human resource development for the future will hinge on reducing both high school drop out rates and on welfare reform in order to bring the marginalized more fully into the economic mainstream. (Ref.: Microsoft CanWin Conference)

Fine Arts Programs must evolve Community Outreach strategies as a core aspect of BFA or MFA pursuits. The community must view its own space as a feedback loop, enmeshed with creative thinking.

Public Art must continue evolving the experience of urban space. Public art must work toward a more seamless vision of public space as it relates to private space. Both public and private space must be viewed as an educational opportunity, one that enriches daily experience, promotes personal reflection and encourages communal exploration.

Public Space must be seen as a community interface. Public Space must be viewed as temporal, constantly in flux. Public Space must enhance community interaction while fostering creative thinking. As a collection of sites for research and development, Public Space must be viewed as the foundation of the emerging creative economy.

A leading area for creative partnerships is in the Art & Health field.

Micro-Engagement: No story s 2 sml.

About the Author

Ken Blackburn did his undergraduate work at Queens University and holds an MFA from the University of Windsor. He has 10 years experience in international development and is currently the Executive Director of the Campbell River Arts Council and the Public Program Coordinator for the Museum at Campbell River.