



culture 21

Agenda 21 for culture

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The City We Love

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Article published in the 5th report of Agenda 21 for culture:

Cities, cultures and developments

A report that marks the fifth anniversary of Agenda 21 for culture



Ajuntament de Barcelona
Barcelona Cultura



United Cities and Local Governments
Cités et Gouvernements Locaux Unis
Ciudades y Gobiernos Locales Unidos

The City We Love

Simon Brault

President of Culture Montreal

'Montreal and I mutually adopted each other thirty-five years ago. It is not the biggest, the richest or even the most beautiful city. I would not leave it for anything in the world: it is an authentic milieu of life, a place of difference and exchange, a place where hopes are born, dreams last and soulful people want to live.'

Michel Goulet, sculptor¹

The contribution of culture to the socio-economic development of communities is a field of study, expertise and concrete experiences that has become all but unavoidable. At the same time, the role of local communities in the preservation of cultural diversity is being increasingly recognized and campaigned for, spreading the networks of municipalities beyond the habitual borders. The speed with which the promoters of the Agenda 21 for culture managed to equip and facilitate the networking of actors from this vast informal movement is an example to all and illustrates the energy that stimulates the bearers of local cultural development all over the world and at every level.

However, the implementation of cultural development projects that bring direction and prosperity to communities and are representative of their uniqueness also depends on a component that may seem difficult to obtain but which is nevertheless vital to the success of these projects: a method of governance based on credible and constructive dynamics of exchange between the political authorities and civil society. It was in an attempt to rise to this challenge of citizenship that Culture Montréal was set up in 2002.

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¹ City of Montreal, Montréal, métropole culturelle, Politique de développement culturel 2005-2015, September 2005, p. 58 (www.ville.montreal.qc.ca/culture)

Culture at the core of Montreal's development

Culture Montréal is an independent non-profit organisation providing a platform for all those interested in fostering culture as an essential part of the development of Montreal. Its 700 members come from environments as diverse as business and education and the community itself, grouped around a solid core of participants from the sector of arts and culture. They include many politicians, entrepreneurs and citizens often renowned in their field for their exceptional leadership and sincere dedication to the implementation of a cultural metropolis, since the reason for being part of Culture Montréal, and the point of convergence among all of the private interests of its members, is Montreal, the city in which they live, the city they love, the inimitable metropolis of the American continent. Mainly francophone but often inhabited by bilingual and even trilingual citizens, cosmopolitan and inclusive, a living modern example of an architectural heritage and socio-cultural traditions often several hundred years old, a melting pot of creative strength that spreads across the world in countless areas, such as arts and culture, Montreal instils pride and affection among those who adopt it. The dynamism and influence of the great consultation project that is Culture Montréal no doubt rest on this simple but powerful profession of faith.

Echoing many of the principles set down in the Agenda 21 for culture – adopted by Montreal in June 2005 – Culture Montréal has pursued three main aims over the past seven years: the right to, participation in and access to culture for all citizens, the prominent role of culture in the development of the city and, lastly, the profile of Montreal as a cultural metropolis by its creativity, cultural diversity and national and international projection.. Strengthened by the commitment of its twenty-one members of the Board and advisory committees, it organises the processes of reflection, consultation and representation required to reach its aims through the following strategic priorities: cultural diversity of artistic expression, support to artistic excellence and emerging artistic practices, a living presence of arts and culture in education and, lastly, application of an urban planning that respects architectural and environmental heritage, giving pride of place to public art.

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The highly heterogeneous and non-partisan nature of the organisation and the expertise that it has accumulated in various sectors through the continued dedication of members who are experts in their fields have made it a credible mouthpiece for metropolitan cultural development and at the same time a formidable hub of consultation whose legitimacy and effectiveness were confirmed in the organisation and hosting of *Rendez-vous novembre 2007 – Montréal Métropole culturelle*.

The city we dream of

Equipped with quality culture infrastructures and a pool of creators of a variety rarely seen, combined with its relative demographic and economic importance, Montreal has several of the essential ingredients of a cultural metropolis worthy of the name: a critical mass of leading educational, research, conservation, production and broadcasting institutions; numerous quality festivals of renown; preservation of its architectural heritage, and a high cultural profile in its neighbourhoods.

Nevertheless, the need had been observed over several years to break with the prevailing defeatism and cynicism and to halt the continued erosion of the ability to decide and act that checked any serious ambition for metropolitan development. Devised by Culture Montréal and developed in close collaboration with the Chamber of Commerce of metropolitan Montreal, the regional culture summit *Rendez-vous novembre 2007 – Montréal métropole culturelle* focused therefore on the presentation and collective adoption of a plan of specific actions geared towards accelerating the implementation and consolidation of Montreal as an international cultural metropolis by 2017.

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The drafting of a plan of action to be studied and approved by civil society was initially based on a new municipal policy of cultural development, in turn based on a close understanding of Montreal's cultural ecosystem, which had to be combined with an honest examination of the strengths and weaknesses of this environment. By focusing on what makes Montreal different to other cultural metropolises, it was immediately possible to set priorities in order to reinforce its distinctive character, which, if nothing else, is an essential condition for the emergence of a sustainable cultural metropolis. Moreover, this laid the foundations for open and constructive dialogue between political leaders and civil society, thus stimulating the development of projects bringing direction and stimulation that fit in with the identity of the milieu and its vision for the future. If we could take away one thing from this experience, it would be this: the active participation of 1,300 people in this two-day event, the numerous investments made since and the unflinching interest that the media always show in the events organised by the board in charge of implementation of the 2007-2017 Plan of Action. However, this lesson of authenticity could not overlook one other essential ingredient of sustainable cultural development: leadership.

Proposed by Culture Montréal during the municipal election campaign of November 2005, this event attracted the interest of city council candidates from the very outset. A few months later, the provincial Minister for Culture and the Federal Minister for the Region of Montreal joined the new mayor and the Chairwoman and General Manager of the Chamber of Commerce of metropolitan Montreal in a steering committee chaired and encouraged by myself as Chairman of Culture Montréal. Despite understandable tensions in a meeting of three levels of government and the matters pertaining to jurisdiction, prerogatives, budgets, programmes and attributions that are invariably raised, this political consultation allowed us to accomplish the feat of defining in just eighteen months a plan of action that would implement the main actions responding to five strategic priorities over ten years.

This leadership became even more evident when, over the two days of the event, representatives of arts and culture and civil society in general were given the exclusive opportunity to listen to several provincial and federal government ministers, the Mayor of Montreal, members of their cabinets and top-ranking officials and directors of the three arts councils, defining a common desire for change that could lead to the necessary consensuses for decision-making. We also saw the strengthening and multiplication of alliances within civil society and the establishment of the bases for a new relationship on matters of development with political leaders and the administrative system, giving rise to a new form of cultural governance in Montreal without which the entire project would now be inconceivable.

The Agenda 21 for culture, an exemplary and formidable movement of ideas, will only be able to become a truly international movement of actions if a leadership emerges at the same time in communities and policy-makers. The process will also need to expand its networks, enrich its sources of expertise and promote a significant breakthrough in the mobilisation of citizens.

What can be said of the impact of the Agenda 21 for culture on the roots of this far-reaching event for Montreal? Through its projection and the quality of its contribution as a source of expertise and information on best practices in local development through culture, the Agenda 21 for culture is a formidable planning and legitimising tool for communities that wish to adopt such a change. The recent announcement by Quebec's Ministry of Culture, Communications and the Status of Women explaining that it will draw up an Agenda 21 for culture for Quebec from now until 2013 and that it will make this action the focus of its plan of action for sustainable development, is a clear example of the credibility of the movement. The city of Montreal, which became a member some months before the publication of its own culture policy in September 2005, entered the municipality in a prestigious network that contributes to the city's projection, adds weight to the demands it makes of other levels of government and reinforces the lasting quality of its cultural rights commitments to citizens. Moreover, the marriage between Culture Montréal and the city of Montreal through their membership of this network of influence encourages the continuity of their collaboration in spite of issues inherent to the regular exercise of democracy.

Nevertheless, it would appear that the Agenda 21 for culture, an exemplary and formidable movement of ideas, will only be able to become a truly international movement of actions if a leadership emerges at the same time in communities and policy-makers, and this leadership creates platforms of cultural governance based on informed, contributory and productive dialogue between civil society and political and administrative authorities; in other words, if all the action taken in this direction stems from the very essence of democratic life. While the Agenda 21 for culture provides sufficient fuel for this objective in certain aspects, we will need to work on others over the coming years, notably the expansion of the network of influence of the Agenda 21 for culture, the enrichment of its sources of expertise and a significant breakthrough in the mobilisation of citizens.

What citizens want

In Canada, like everywhere else, cities cannot be the sole backers of major cultural development projects, so they require funding from other levels of government. Hence, the latter must adhere to the vision of cultural development set out by communities. This is not yet the case.

We can study the prevailing situation in the United States, for example, to reflect on local-national dynamics and on the difficulty in getting across arguments concerning the intrinsic value and financial and social repercussions of public funding for arts and culture. The outcry caused by the National Endowment for the Arts' request to spend a paltry 50 million of the 800-billion-dollar stimulus package adopted by US Congress on the protection of jobs in artistic organisations is further proof of the need to increase the scope of the discourse on the real benefits of arts and culture for society. This increased power of persuasion requires a stronger commitment to the Agenda 21 for culture in North America, where the network is virtually non-existent. Moreover, considering the importance of exchanges and influences between the United States and Canada, it is high time we developed strategic alliances to mobilise leaderships on the importance of local cultural development at international as well as municipal level, since cities – even when connected in a network – cannot carry the burden of proof alone.

On the subject of arguments, it would be interesting to ask ourselves what a breakthrough in North America or even in Asia could bring to the Agenda 21 for culture network. For example, one of the factors in the success of the November 2007 event was probably the tenor of the discourse created for the occasion around the project of a cultural metropolis, which has sought from the earliest attempts at consultation to explain that this project belongs entirely to all actors of metropolitan socio-economic development and, indeed, to all citizens, rather than simply being driven by the cultural milieu. To achieve this, it was often a case of 'deculturalising' the cultural metropolis project; though inadequate in certain respects, this neologism nevertheless contributed to the participation of new milieus, such as business and university research, in the priorities set down in the 2007-2017 Plan of Action.

Moreover, a discourse is emerging in the United States defending the view that the presence of arts and culture in a community has a direct effect on the incidence of volunteer action and the rate of electoral participation. The power of the arguments of this discourse are quickly assimilated, regardless of how well we understand the place of patriotism and the ideal of electoral democracy in the American identity. Although the argument of the financial repercussions of cultural development has not yet worn thin, it is important to try and enrich the discursive baggage on the validity of an increased presence of the arts and culture in communities.

Along these same lines, the leaders of the Agenda 21 for culture would benefit from gathering innovative know-how on the mobilisation of citizens that goes beyond the consumerist approach and translates the idea of culture's cross-sector contribution to community development in order to generate an inclusive and lasting commitment from citizens that will have an impact on public policies. While raising awareness of the positive effects of arts and culture on communities among world leaders appears to be the priority, it is also vital to support communities themselves in the creation of a shared sense of cultural pride and affection as an essential factor in social cohesion and individual self-fulfilment. Promising models appear to be emerging in this field, such as Quebec's Les Arts et la Ville network, which circumscribes these concerns to contexts other than those of big cities, separating 'culture' from 'urbanity'. Through its support of cultural development efforts in rural and semi-rural environments, this network could revolutionise the discourse of the right to culture by bringing it closer than ever to the reality of the people, allowing culture to be truly anchored in the collective will of citizens.

- The article and the full report are available on-line at <http://www.cities-localgovernments.org> and <http://www.agenda21culture.net>. They can be reproduced for free as long as UCLG and Barcelona City Council are cited as sources.
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- ISBN of the full report: 978-84-692-6503-1

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