



TO SURVIVE HUMANITY MUST CHANGE ITS BEHAVIOUR: THE 21 ATTRIBUTES OF CULTURAL VITALITY

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It has been fascinating, over the past 15 years, to have watched as the title of my slim monograph became transformed into the catchcry of a globally dispersed movement. Apart from writing some arguments to flesh out an already existing phrase, my contribution to the still continuing struggle to get culture a seat at the planning drawing board has been relatively minor.

Most importantly, this is a moment to honour and celebrate the extraordinary efforts and achievements of the UCLG's Committee on Culture in supporting and promoting cultural action and policy, and to applaud the remarkable abundance of life-affirming cultural initiatives that many of UCLG's constituents have initiated.

But, at least for me, it is also a fitting moment to reflect on just how much (or little) of what I was advocating in that monograph has been embraced. Sadly, I must acknowledge that my fundamental argument has been either overlooked, misunderstood, discarded or abandoned as being too difficult.

Those who have delved beyond its title will recall that the main purpose of my discourse was to contribute to the development of a more effective, and better integrated, public planning framework. Yes, the 'fourth pillar' has, to a certain extent, become a regular part of planning rhetoric, but it is increasingly clear that, while the phrase highlighted the necessity of taking into account the particular behaviours and beliefs of those upon whom plans impact, it has not clarified the theories or methodologies used to develop coherent planning frameworks. If anything, it has contributed to yet more confusion.

This may be because most of the efforts of the new wave of 'culturists' appear to have been largely directed at trying to establish:

- 'culture' as having value in and of itself (not unlike Matthew Arnold's sense of culture as meaning civilisation);
- the 'cultural sector' as being an essential and productive aspect of the economy.

While efforts in these directions may be useful, I think they fall into a couple of traps:

- one of the, perhaps inevitable, results of attempting to formulate, and act within, a discrete area of cultural functions may be to isolate cultural energy and focus into a self-referential merry-go-round - another silo (pillar) on the landscape.
- the 'economising' of culture, beyond simply encouraging the commodification of cultural activity (making it amenable to measurement), requires that the indicators devised for evaluating culture are all numerical and significantly financial: perspectives become skewed.

There is a tendency to focus public policy making energy on 'culture' as if it were an industrial sector of the economy, making products for the market. While communications, entertainment, education, advertising & domestic affairs are usually not included within the boundaries of cultural/creative sector, the rump – performing, media and plastic arts, literature and publishing, galleries, museums, and heritage – is viewed institutionally. That is, as enclosing constructs – an imagined sector quite content to self-select and settle under its very own dome (in its very own silo).

The confusion has been exacerbated by the conflation of at least half a dozen concepts of culture:

- Culture as part of the explanation/definition/description of the world/ reality (nature/nurture, biology/culture)
- Culture as way of life
- Culture as the production, distribution, and consumption of 'creative' goods
- Culture as an indicator of advanced civilisation
- Culture as a 'bottom line' element (that is, as a cost/value component of activity)
- Culture as the title of one of four perspectives through which to examine plans.



There's nothing wrong with any of these conceptions. The problem lies in confusing them; and assuming that 'culture' is, in and of itself, a 'good'. In the monograph, I wrote that: 'Cultural **vitality** is as essential to a healthy and sustainable society as social equity, environmental responsibility and economic viability. In order for public planning to be more effective, its methodology should include an integrated framework of cultural evaluation along similar lines to those being developed for social, environmental and economic impact assessment.' The Fourth Pillar (Summary pvii).

Why did I chose 'vitality' as the qualifier to culture?

Again, from the monograph:

'A noisy baby is a healthy baby. This child-rearing cliché contains a strong measure of truth when applied to culture. No matter how commendable the values [and behaviour] of a society may be (its culture), they amount to nothing if the society lacks life, vitality, dynamism and democratic public discourse.

'Culture is a fragile and delicate organism. It can easily become atrophied, fragmented, hierarchical, exclusive, lazy, smug, imperialised, passive or one-dimensional. Continuing health needs constant care – this should be the purpose of public cultural intervention. Not so much a focus on progress, development or excellence as on **vitality**:

- culture springs, first and foremost from human interaction – the tangible products of these interactions, no matter how wonderful, are ultimately secondary to the daily exchanges between people;
- making culture is a daily public event – not just in schools, in the media, in the 'culture houses', but also in the streets, shops, trains and cafes;



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- by our behaviour are we known - this never-ending public process is a society's signature.

'... Culture is not a pile of artefacts – it is us; the living, breathing sum of us.

'The manifestations of cultural vitality are the opposites of the list above: robust diversity, tolerant cohesiveness, multi-dimensional egalitarianism, compassionate inclusivity, energetic creativity, open-minded curiosity, confident independence, rude health. Attributes such as these will help us make a future our children will thank us for.' The Fourth Pillar (pp22-23).

Beyond this small final paragraph, what I did not do in the monograph was identify what might be seen as the key ingredients of cultural vitality. So, I am taking the opportunity to do so now – the (twenty-one) optimum behaviours that may lead to a healthy and continuing social life are:

An open culture that:

is welcoming and hospitable to both strangers and strange ideas;

is open in the sense of being receptive and in the sense of being transparent;

is polite, civil and gentle.



An engaged culture:

whose citizenry actively participate in all aspects of making sense, from art-making to self-government;

whose members do not simply engage with tools and ideas but with each other;

whose members are connected rather than isolated, atomised and alienated;

whose members actively engage with the processes of determination (that is, governance);

AND a culture that is engaged with other cultures.

A robust culture that:

revels in argument;

is noisy, clamorous and energetic;

is committed to 'permanent' debate; in particular, of issues of how to live together.

A value-rich culture in which:

the question, 'what matters?' is an issue of universal and ongoing public debate;

values are taken seriously and their development is cherished - not as rules carved in stone, but as a dynamic and fluid sphere of public awareness in which heritages and aspirations constantly jostle and negotiate;

there is a widespread commitment to ongoing public debate about 'civic virtue', human rights, democracy, wellbeing, diversity ...

An authentic culture:

in which there is dispersed ownership, self-governance and determination of cultural production;

in which there is widespread recognition that freedom and independence are dependent on cultural democracy;

that recognises that the fundamental condition of owning a thing is that one has made that thing with one's own hands. Hiring experts is OK for getting the plumbing fixed but not for establishing one's identity.

A diverse culture that:

embraces difference: 'Just as biodiversity is an essential component of ecological sustainability, so is cultural diversity essential to social sustainability. Diverse values should not be respected just because we are tolerant folk, but because we must have a pool of diverse

perspectives in order to survive, to adapt to changing conditions, to embrace the future'. (*The Fourth Pillar*, p.14)

recognizes that homogeneity is a recipe for disaster (and for boredom). Even economists recognise, at least in its theory, the need for diversity.

An inclusive culture:

that recognises that we are all in this together and that we all have a right and an obligation to become actively involved in decision-making;

in which the idea of commonwealth is taken seriously and egalitarianism is not a dirty word.

A respectful culture in which:

its own diversity and its diverse peoples are honoured and cherished;

the processes of governance are taken seriously (in the sense of a preparedness to engage rather than of subservience).

A curious culture that:

just can't stop wondering why and how and where and when and who. 'What's that?', 'I wonder what's under that?', 'Why is it so?', 'What if?', 'Who benefits?'

A creative culture that recognises:

the function and value of artistic practice;

the potential of all its members to constructively engage in artistic pursuits.

A sceptical culture that:

recognises the need for oppositional thought. We will never get it exactly right, nor will a nearly right remain always nearly right;

embraces the need for constant dissent, for all solutions and their results to be constantly questioned. There is always an alternative, another point of view.

An analytic culture in which:

values and aspirations are constantly and publicly re-examined and expressed;

there is constant revision;

the inevitable gaps between aspirations and outcomes, values and behaviour, plans and results are carefully and publicly examined;

there is open and continuous review of all aspects of governance, ensuring that the results of public initiatives are understood and that mistakes are learned from.

A learned culture in which:

knowledge is dispersed and democratised;
there is a recognition of the need to encourage an active and creative engagement with ideas, art and values from the earliest age until death;
there is universal assistance to citizens wishing to become equipped to engage.

A risk-taking culture that:

has the confidence and courage to experiment, to ask difficult questions, to admit mistakes, to appear foolish, to face the unknown.

A synthesising culture:

that is not static;
in which there is constant intra and interchange;
that embraces and supports innovation;
that builds on and adapts its diverse traditions.

A nurturing culture that:

is generous and forgiving and in which care and welfare are cherished values and activities;
knows that we are all responsible for the health and happiness of each other.

A tooled-up culture in which:

there is widespread public access to the tools of expression, from skilled facilitators to production studios (for all forms of making); from distributive media (galleries, meeting places, broadcasting, internet) to promotional time;
public space, both physical and conceptual, is bountiful and welcoming. Spaces in and through which citizens can powerfully engage with their visions of a collective future.

An historically aware culture with:

dynamic and creative connections to its multiple histories and heritages: 'Knowing where we come from helps us to discover where we want to go. Our social memory and our repositories of insight and understanding are essential elements to our sense of belonging. Without a sense of our past, we are adrift in an endless present.' (The Fourth Pillar)

A regenerative culture that:

respects the rights of new generations to discover their own paths.

Each new generation, of necessity, re-invents the wheel. No matter how often the middle aged exhort the young to avoid the pitfalls of their forebears, to recognise the antecedents of their endeavours, this is advice that the young don't want, and perhaps don't need, to hear.

It is probably true that there is nothing new under the sun, but it is hard to imagine a more inhibiting homily. Perhaps every path has been trod, every mountain climbed, but for those undertaking these journeys afresh, a map is the last thing they need.

They need to be looking at the environment anew, not at a fusty guidebook. After all, we who have gone before haven't exactly achieved utopia. Fresh minds will invent new solutions.

A well-led culture that:

exhibits leadership that recognises, and accordingly acts, in the spirit of service rather than of command;

respects but does not defer to its leadership;

exhibits leadership that does not imply the superiority and power of the leader but that recognises that we are all creative, we are all intelligent and that we all have the capacity to join in the decision-making process;

exhibits leadership that encourages the shy and inarticulate to speak out, that recognises the marginalised, that democratises power, that facilitates collaboration.

An outward looking culture that:

confident of its own health, is eager to discover both the differences and the commonalities among the myriad of other ways of living that surround it.

Keeping these attributes in mind when considering actions that will affect the future would be a significant step towards making plans that have a good chance of successful implementation and that contribute to not only sustainability but also inclusiveness, well-being and engagement.

After all, it seems to me to be blindingly obvious that no planning initiative has the slightest chance of being effective UNLESS the beliefs and behaviours (that is, the culture) of those upon whom the action will impact are taken into account.

And, in conclusion, the connection between culture and sustainability is pretty simple really:

To survive humanity must change its behaviour.



INTERNATIONAL AWARD “UCLG - MEXICO CITY - CULTURE 21”

The objective of the “International Award UCLG - MEXICO City - Culture 21” is to recognise leading cities and people that have distinguished themselves through their contribution to culture as a dimension of sustainable development. On 19-20 May 2016, the jury composed by Eduardo Vázquez Martín, María Victoria Alcaraz, Emmanuel Kouéla, Leônidas de Oliveira, and Farida Shaheed held its last meeting for deliberating on the designation of a city among the 83 candidates and a winning personality. The Jury decided that the “Individual Award” be shared ex-aequo by Jon Hawkes and Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui. The Award ceremony took place in Mexico City (Mexico) on 27th October 2016.

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