

The Art of Resilience, The Resilience of Art

A paper on the
contribution of art
and culture to urban
resilience and livability

Note to the Reader

This paper is the product of conversations that took place during two linked meetings held between June 27 and July 3, 2013, on Wasan Island on Lake Rosseau in the Muskoka region north of Toronto, Canada, hosted by the Breuninger Foundation, Musagetes, and the J. W. McConnell Family Foundation. Most of the 36 discussants came from Canada, with others from the United States, Europe, and South America. They included artists and cultural workers; representatives of private and community foundations, as well as public arts funders; architects; environmentalists; publishers; impact investors; and academics working on sustainable business, community sustainability, and arts and social change. The list of participants is included at Appendix A. There are many examples of the impacts described in this paper. Rather than choosing just a few, we have created a website to solicit and share examples and invite you to visit the site to learn more at cocreating.citiesforpeople.ca.

Executive Summary

We live at a time when humanity, and urban dwellers especially, are being called upon to forestall and recover from disruptions to built, social, and natural systems. The capacity of people and communities to creatively adapt, face stresses cooperatively, to formulate just and effective responses, and, as needed, to moderate and/or reshape behaviour in order to maintain an effective social order, is more commonly referred to as resilience. The premise of this paper is that in addition to the necessary work of fortifying physical infrastructure and upgrading emergency response procedures, planners, policy makers, social innovators, and investors seeking to adapt our environmental, social, and economic systems must include culture as an essential fourth dimension of resilience and livability. This paper refers to “culture” both in the universal sense, which derives from the aggregated patterns of daily life, commerce, and governance, and to “arts-based culture” where artists, architects, and designers shape public perception and experience. The point is that these two are intertwined, and that to an extent perhaps not fully appreciated or applied, the latter influences the former. This paper is addressed to people both inside and around the arts and cultural sector, and describes in broad terms the contribution of art and culture to urban resilience and livability. It introduces several principles by which this work might be guided and strengthened, and outlines areas where culture’s relationship to resilience creates openings for art and artists to enhance community vibrancy and civic engagement, while sparking the imagination and pursuit of desirable options to the status quo. It concludes with a call to build a global culture of resilience.

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Ideas about identity and social space are grounded in the possibilities of imagination, in streams of fantasy that rise up to either order or disrupt our comprehension of the world.¹

— Helene Shulman and Mary Watkins

Art, resilience, and culture

Resilience, like art, permeates and shapes our cultures and constitutes a responsive and generative field that enlivens individuals, neighbourhoods, communities, institutions, and societies. Resilient cities adapt rapidly and creatively to constantly changing conditions. By moving beyond mechanistic approaches that focus on linear models of cause-and-effect to consider culture, complexity, and possibility, we see an opportunity to demonstrate locally and globally that achieving resiliency is an art as well as a science.

Strengthening urban resilience is not an option: It is an imperative. In order to produce the environmental, economic, social, and cultural conditions under which societies can thrive within planetary limits, the world's most dynamic cities must become more resilient and livable. Diminishing natural capital from resource consumption; growing disparities between the rich and the poor; the immediate and impending impacts of climate change; global migration and population change; sectarian conflict; and economic upheaval all pose ongoing and potential shocks to cities. At the same time, cities and the regions that support them are the critical source and location for the adaptations upon which humanity's present and future depend.

The movement towards greater urban resilience has begun, and it involves multisectoral efforts to manage complex challenges. It is co-creative. Tech entrepreneurs, street vendors, public health practitioners, artists, and farmers depend on each other to be innovators. Innovation and actions taken together to augment individuals' and communities' capacity to adapt repeatedly to changing circumstances are the warp and weft of resilience.

A resilient culture is one where everyone contributes. Culture is the backbone of every society; it is our first education—the crux of our socialization—and it is every generation's right and responsibility to enjoy it while providing for civilization's long-term survival. Throughout history societies

whose cultures were too rigid to adapt to new circumstances have been erased by the gradual or sudden loss of physical, social, or economic capital. Resilient societies, on the other hand, are able to shift focus, provide for the vulnerable, and—taking the long view—reorder priorities and generate adaptive arrangements that address known and unanticipated change.

As agents of cultural shift, art and artists raise the alarm; they raise consciousness, and they raise spirits. They bring us to our senses, helping us to feel, think, and see differently. They are portrayers of the possible, provoking and informing the imagination of states beyond present conditions, and conveying the promise and potential of transformation. As Don McKay writes, “the poetic frame permits the possible to be experienced as a power rather than a deficiency; it permits the imagination entry, finding wider resonances, leading us to contemplate further implications for ourselves.”²²

Art can be disruptive. In this sense, artists are the outsiders: the powerful strangers who pose discomfiting questions to the self-satisfied, who speak truth to power. Resilience requires that we pay attention to what lies within and beyond the city gates of comfort and complacency. Artists are the ones who scan those horizons, who act as scouts and heralds of what is hidden and what is to come.

Purposeful and democratic work on resilience makes societal vulnerabilities more visible, and rallies the creative capacity of all sectors to generate and test adaptive solutions. Vulnerable individuals and communities themselves are essential players in any process of adaptation and renewal that leads to greater urban resilience. Amidst struggle and despair, art inspires and gives hope. Artists around the world have used the power of their art to, in the words of William Cleveland, “make us understand, resolve conflict, heal unspeakable trauma, give voice to the forgotten and disappeared, and re-stitch the cultural fabric of their communities.”²³ Artists explore the fundamental question of how we are social, how we coexist. Chinese artist Ai Weiwei, French artist Ernest Pignon, Canadian artist Rebecca Belmore, Turkish artist Kutluğ Ataman, and American artist Susan Crile, among others, are contemporary artists who critique and expand human rights and social justice worldwide. Artists are central protagonists in global movements for equality, an essential underpinning of community resilience.

Creative urgency and creative agency

“Ever tried. Ever failed. No matter. Try again. Fail again. Fail better.”⁴

— Samuel Beckett

Are we facing a precipice or approaching a threshold? History and science tell us that when new energy flows into decaying systems, their components reorganize to higher levels of order. Such as when, during the Late Middle Ages, against a backdrop of plague, ignorance, and religious wars, a new communications technology—movable type—emerged. The scientific method and other manifold advances in science and the arts followed. Polyphonic music, Copernican theory, and the introduction of perspective in painting presaged and accompanied these profound reorderings of the human estate we now know as the Renaissance and the Reformation.

Today, we are witnessing and co-creating a shift in global civic culture of similar magnitude. Creative engagement towards resilience builds upon and integrates work being done in social finance (micro-finance, impact investing), social technology (the Internet, Wikipedia, smartphones, Facebook), and the generational shift to a post-carbon economy. The art of resilience could be restated as the art of learning to live together as though our future really mattered. Writers, musicians, filmmakers, architects, designers must engage us all, whether as audience, students, or collaborators, in co-creating a new narrative, a new narrative for humanity.

The Centripetal Force

“A human community, if it is to last long, must exert a sort of centripetal force, holding local soil and local memory in place. Practically speaking, human society has no work more important than this. Once we have acknowledged this principle, we can only be alarmed at the extent to which it has been ignored.”⁵

— Wendell Berry

Here, then, are several sets of principles to be elaborated and espoused by those seeking a broad advance towards urban resilience and livability:

- Start with hospitality, inclusivity, diversity, and generosity. These signal a desire not just to responsively welcome and include those who share a commitment to a resilient culture, but to proactively seek out people with other abilities, perspectives, experiences, and identities. We put particular emphasis on inclusion of the vulnerable—as a moral obligation, and as a necessary attribute of any diverse and resilient system.
- Second, embrace complexity. Be mindful of context, expect the unexpected, and be conscious that in complex systems, small changes can have effects across different nested scales. Accept nature as context and teacher.
- Acknowledge and respect both our own and others’ vulnerability. Empathy is a fundamental human capacity for shaping consciousness, for bridging cultural and political divides. Trust in co-creation, in equality, and endeavour to replace dysfunctional power structures with relational and inclusive democratic frameworks.
- Recognize the importance of place and community. Be mindful of the local/global continuum, and of the need to pursue equitable models of exchange and reciprocity with people and places more vulnerable than ours.
- Encourage curiosity and flexibility and appreciate joy and delight. They are integral to the great transition before us.

- Finally, work with an appreciation for history, with gratitude and regret for the efforts and mistakes that have enabled humanity to arrive at this moment, and with a sense of obligation and humility as we make our own contribution to perpetuating the human endeavour.

Embracing these principles, act with hope and urgency to make our cities and societies more livable and resilient.

Release the capacity of the people, focusing on the vulnerable

Resilient cities comprise a mix of large-scale systems that enable the city to function, and granular innovations that underpin and influence those systems and ensure the city continues to adapt and thrive. Resilience in these systems depends on the capacity of the people—who are the city—to develop on-the-ground responses to make their lives safe, productive, and meaningful. Artists can surface and sustain the capacity of people by working in creative collaboration with vulnerable and marginalized communities, fomenting strategies of self-realization, adaptation, and emancipation through context-based, participatory art. This art does not displace the vulnerable. It includes them, inspires them, and makes room for them as co-creators.

Integrate work cross-sectorally and holistically

For local responses to pressing challenges to be developed and integrated, cross-sectoral engagement is essential. Government and public institutions, local businesses, cultural organizations, academia, and other civil society organizations all have a direct stake in supporting urban resiliency and livability, and none can accomplish this alone. This is where art and artists engage us as whole beings, irrespective of affiliation or background. New social process tools such as social innovation labs, the U Process, and other social structures for exploring possibility, use the tools of artistic inquiry, metaphor, and model building to co-create ideas. They enable us to work from the inside out and the outside in, drawing upon wellsprings of imagination and creativity that lie within us all.

Connect, connect, connect

Networks, institutions, designers, thought leaders, and the public play complementary roles in field-building—an important dimension of innovation in resilient systems. The layering of intersections

within and across fields allows for clustering and regrouping, uncoupling and recombining, and the introduction of options that are the hallmarks of resilience. When we engage in deliberation and design spanning diverse domains—such as health, justice, and urban planning—new approaches, ideas, models, strategies, and solutions become visible and possible.

Reduce ecological footprints; increase civic footprints

Community studios and other shared spaces foster personal growth and social capital. Faculties of fine art, architecture, and design that operate community access and outreach programs enlarge their “civic footprint,” providing students with real-life issues to work on, and ensuring that a diversity of people have access to tools and space for creative expression. Cultural mediation—a process of building bridges between the cultural and social realms—points to further horizons of institutional and community renewal. In cities worldwide, we see the outlines of new civic cultures, with concentrations of artists focused on creativity, personal growth, and community engagement instead of on the pursuit of economic goals at any cost.

Tell the story, be transparent

Urban resilience grows when the successes and failures of experimentation are visible. When transparency and storytelling are integrated into cultural and economic innovation, urban discourse evolves towards an ethic of generosity, risk-taking, and learning. Stories of successes and failures enable us to learn from the experience of policymakers and politicians, from philanthropists and public funders, from artists, and other sectors. Honest and meaningful narratives enable greater resilience. Embedding artists and storytellers in the midst of disparate initiatives and enterprises holds potential for renewed civic discourse, accelerated dissemination of new ideas, and a cultural shift away from blaming and mistrust to one of learning and openness.

Every voice counts: renewing the democratic process

In Occupy, Idle No More, Indignado, and other movements for political reform, we detect a profound and largely unmet civic appetite for involvement in local and global governance. Artists bring meaning, visualization, and imagination to such processes, and by doing so, elicit participation in public discourse and place-making. Eventually culturally infused decision-making could contribute to

what Elinor Ostrom—the first woman and non-economist to win the Nobel Prize in Economics—called “polycentric governance⁶.” In short, governance designed to produce resilience through the re-engagement of individuals, households and communities in the pursuit of the public good, working at different levels of scale and taking into account our shared interest in preserving the natural capital upon which life depends.

Move money to meaning

What does it mean to invest in resilience? We need increased capacity to fund small-scale initiatives or prototypes that can be tested quickly, adjusted, and retested, along with a means of scaling up those that produce greater resilience. And we need to adopt a seriously long view of infrastructure investments, integrating advanced social and environmental values in a manner consistent with intergenerational equity and informed by genuine intergenerational discourse—a creative/cultural project that awaits development.

Resources beyond money

While money is important, many other resources are needed to increase urban resilience and livability, including non-monetary exchange systems, tools, and approaches to better leverage existing resources. Those with physical spaces can explore ways for those resources to become places for social engagement, artistic practice, and learning. Public infrastructure designed for a different era—from schools to post offices—can be creatively repurposed for the needs of today and tomorrow. Including spaces for artistic and cultural production makes such spaces vibrant, welcoming, and generative of economic and social possibility.

Towards a regenerative culture: a resilient life in a resilient world

The global challenge calls for a response, for us to fully engage in the cultivation of a resilient life. It calls on cities, communities, and individuals in the global south and global north, in the west and in the east, and to those living in peace and those living in conflict.

Linear, narrow approaches have given us railroads, pipelines, and street grids, but we are now at the point—economically, socially, environmentally, and culturally—where a sea change is required to evolve from linearity to holistic integration. Resilience compels us to partner across disciplines and silos, spans geographies and circumstance, class, race, and ability; it demands that we engage with diversity—with the other—in mutual pursuit of a good life. It invites all to solve problems, address challenges, and seize opportunities that benefit people living in cities and communities all around the world, where signs of promise are evident. Urban dwellers are inventing new approaches to public health, food security, resource management, neighbourhood revitalization, and job creation, harnessing the creative capital that is the life-blood of any city. This is where the new language, the emerging practice of resilience is apparent.

Let us search out those among us who can see, hear, represent, translate, contain, empower, resist, mobilize, satirize, celebrate, provoke, and make clear the connections we lack, and then let us work together to ensure we make sustainable, inclusive, wise, and just decisions, to build a resilient urban future for all.

Begin. Now.

Participants, Wasan Island Resiliency Dialogues

June 28—July 3, 2013

Linda Albright, Arts Network of Children and Youth
Janice Astbury, Cities for People
Matthew Blackett, Spacing Magazine
Simon Brault, O.C., O.Q., National Theatre School of Canada, Culture Montreal
Cameron Charlebois, Consultant in Urban Development & Chair, Blue Metropolis Foundation
Genevieve Cimon, Director of Music Education and Community Engagement,
National Arts Centre
David Codling, British Council
Seanna Connell, Project Director, ArtBridges/ToileDesArts
David Cossin, Artist
Professor Ann Dale, Chair, Sustainable Community Development, Royal Roads University
Talia Dorsey, The Commons Inc.
Anne Dunning, ARTS Action Research
Tim Dramin, Social Innovation Generation
Volker Hann, Director International Programs, Breuninger Foundation
Ruth Howard, Jumblies Theatre
Stephen Huddart, J. W. McConnell Family Foundation
Seana Irvine, Evergreen
Am Johal, SFU Woodward's Cultural Unit
John Knechtel, Alphabet City
Irena Kregar-Šegota, City of Rijeka (Croatia)
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Althea Thauburger, Artist
Janis Timm-Bottos, La Ruche d'Art: The Canadian Art Hive Movement
Vanessa Timmer, Executive Director, One Earth
Shawn Van Sluys, Musagetes
Kelly Wilhelm, Canada Council for the Arts

Endnotes

¹ Helene Shulman and Mary Watkins, "Toward Psychologies of Liberation" (Palgrave Macmillan, September 2008), 151.

² Don McKay, *The Shell of the Tortoise* (Kentville, NS: Gaspereau Press, 2011), 55.

³ William Cleveland, *Art and Upheaval: Artists on the World's Frontlines* (Oakland, CA: New Village Press, 2008).

⁴ Samuel Beckett, *Worstward Ho* (1983).

⁵ Wendell Berry, *The Work of Local Culture (An Essay)*.

http://www.schumachersociety.org/publications/essay_work_of_local.html

⁶ Ostrom, Elinor. "Beyond Markets and States: Polycentric Governance of Complex Economic Systems," (*American Economic Review*, 100(3), 2010), 641-72.