

Understanding Culture

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I've been asked to talk about how an understanding of culture in society can assist local government to achieve active and engaged citizenship and vital communities. I have also been asked to address the need to promote the cultural and creative rights of communities and to provide an introduction to the value of participatory arts in community building.

I can't do full justice to these topics in half an hour, so this will be a skim across the surface. If you want to make a more detailed exploration of these ideas, try the Cultural Development Network of Victoria's publication, *'The Fourth Pillar of Sustainability: culture's essential role in public planning'*.

Yes, this is a plug for my own book, but it's also a chance to pay tribute to the Network and it's Executive Officer, Judy Spokes. The work of the Network, and of Judy, has played a key role in expanding the understanding of cultural vitality in the context of local government policy development.

Local governments have been developing cultural policies for at least two decades. The fact is, most of these have been arts policies, which, in itself is no bad thing, except that, by calling them cultural policies, public servants have deprived themselves of an exceptionally useful tool in their planning kits.

This lumping together of arts and culture began because culture was originally introduced into the public planning lexicon on the back of the arts. 'Arts and culture' rapidly became a cliché and a counterproductive misnomer (imagine a chapter in a cookbook called 'broccoli and vegetables') that has weakened our capacity to deal productively with either arts or culture.

It was these realisations that motivated me to write *'The Fourth Pillar'*.

In this small volume, I use 'culture' in what is known as its 'anthropological' sense (it is also the sense in which it is used in the 1996 UNESCO Declaration of Cultural Rights).

In this context, the concept 'culture' describes:

- our values and aspirations;
- the ways we develop, receive and transmit these values, and
- the ways of life these processes produce.

While this outline is fine as a dictionary definition, it misses the heart and the guts of culture.

A couple of months ago, I was asked by Deborah Mills to comment on a draft of Cultural Planning Guidelines for Local Government in New South Wales. Building on her original work, I suggested this preamble as a description of culture:

Our culture embodies the sense we make of our lives; it is built on the values we share and the ways we come to terms with our differences; it deals with what matters to people and communities: relationships, memories, experiences, identities, backgrounds, hopes and dreams in all their diversity. And most of all, our culture expresses our visions of the future: what it is we want to pass on to future generations.

Our culture connects our present with our pasts and with the future we imagine. It is with culture that we make the connections, the networks of meanings and values, and of friendship and interest, that hold us together in time, in place and in society.

Our culture describes the ways we tell each other our stories, how we create our sense of ourselves, how we remember who we are, how we imagine who we want to become, how we relax, how we celebrate, how we argue, how we bring up our children, the spaces we make for ourselves.

Our culture is the expression of our desires to be happy, our desires to belong, our desires to survive and, above all, our desires to be creative.

This description demonstrates that culture describes those facets of our being that make us human; it embodies our essence.

This usage of 'culture' can be summarised as 'the social production of meaning', or simply 'making sense'.

And, of all the things we make, 'sense' is the most important; we need to recognise and facilitate this process in the ways we organise our society.

Never has there been more political rhetoric about values than now. But current public planning tools contain no mechanisms that formally facilitate ongoing, regular and accessible ways of connecting the generation, expression and influence of community values and aspirations to the development and evaluation of public planning. This is why I support the application of a fourth, cultural, perspective to stand alongside the standard triangle of social, environmental and economic 'pillars'.

Not least, because it is through cultural action:

- that we make sense of our existence and the environment we inhabit;
- that we find common expressions of our values and needs, and
- that we meet the challenges presented by our continuing stewardship of the planet.

Without culture, we are, quite literally, not human.

And a system of governance that lacks an integrated cultural perspective is equally bereft.

Originally, my main objective had been to get a cultural perspective onto the agenda. I didn't really put much thought into the functionality of the other three perspectives, or indeed, of the comprehensiveness of the four perspectives as an integrated totality.

Shortly after publication, I noticed that others were developing critiques of the triangular model as well. Among these, one in particular stood out for me. It was one that proposed 'governance' as a fourth perspective (and, incidentally, relegated 'cultural' to being a subset of 'social').

Now, being a political animal at heart, I recognised that governance (describing the way we organise ourselves, the nature, structure and dynamics of power relations) was indeed a critical issue in any planning framework, and kicked myself for not having given it enough thought.

What I realised was that in obsessing on getting culture up, I had accepted the other three perspectives as given. This was very silly of me.

This is best illustrated by my tacit acceptance of the triple bottom line as a reasonable concept, simply requiring the addition of a fourth line to make it work effectively. What I have realised since writing *The Fourth Pillar* is that the triple bottom line is, in reality, a spectacular scam. Its rhetoric sounds like a profound development from the singular perspective of the economic fundamentalists, but in fact, all it really is is an attempt to bring social and environmental issues into an economic context – unless the workers and consumers are comfy, business will not be able to achieve maximum performance; unless the environment is still there, business will be unable to continue to make a profit from it. Humanising the market, yes, but simultaneously, marketising the human.

So, one of the things I've been doing since *The Fourth Pillar* came out is looking very carefully at the other three perspectives. What I have come to realise is just how pernicious and extensive the ideology of economic rationalism has been. The crusaders of this

fundamentalist cult have not only promoted the 'free market' as the basis of all human relations, they have transformed the meanings of great slabs of our vocabulary.

This is nowhere more evident than in the concepts of economic and social policy. Under the new religion economic policy has come to refer solely to matters concerned with operations of 'the market' and social policy to looking after those so damaged that they can't find their way to the market.

So, just as the concept of culture needed to be extended beyond its popular usage in order to make it a useful planning tool, I think we need to do a similar job on the other three perspectives.

Rather than work backwards, that is, to start with the nominated perspectives and attempt to re-jig them, I've tried to go back to taws, to imagine what the essential planning issues are and to work from there towards a framework that is comprehensive but simple enough to be useful.

I think that it's reasonable to break down public planning into four distinct (but utterly inter-related) components. These can be framed as quite simple questions:

ONE: What are we starting with? OR, What have we got?

TWO: Where do we want to go? OR Why do we want to go anywhere at all?

THREE: How do we get there? OR How do we organise ourselves?

FOUR: Who benefits? OR Is everyone on board?

Question one deals with the CONTEXT in which we find ourselves; the RESOURCES we have to work with.

Question two deals with the PURPOSE of our proposed actions; the IDEAS that inform our directions.

Question three deals with the STRUCTURE through which we will implement our objectives; the decision-making processes, the distribution of POWER.

Question four deals with the PRODUCTION that will take place; the WEALTH (in its widest sense) that will be accumulated and how it will be distributed.

Do these ideas bear any resemblance to the Four Perspectives that are currently proposed?

I believe they do, provided we expand the narrow lenses that environmental, cultural, social and economic analyses have come to focus through.

LENS ONE: the creation, distribution and maintenance of RESOURCES – the CONTEXT: this is the Environmental Perspective

This perspective should not simply refer to the earth's physical resources and our exploitation of them, but to the living system of which we are a part and the entire heritage for which we are responsible.

That is, an environmental perspective gives us the opportunity to analyse our behaviour and our intentions in the **context** of ecological dynamics; to look at **all** our resources – finite and renewable, human and physical, built and natural – and to plan for their protection, maintenance and regeneration.

This approach would allow the environmental perspective to facilitate the development of a wider appreciation of the global ecological system in which we exist and upon which we are dependent.

It would also locate our heritage in a context that takes into account its variety, its value and its multifarious forms.

LENS TWO: the creation, distribution and maintenance of IDEAS – the PURPOSE: this is the Cultural Perspective

When it is mentioned at all, 'culture' usually refers to the arts and/or the 'cultural industries', and is often viewed as a subset of social policy (despite the concerted efforts of many to have it 'upgraded' to the economic level).

The Fourth Pillar presents the arguments in support of using 'culture' as the description of that aspect of analysis that focuses on the intentions and purposes that inform our behaviour.

In moving beyond a focus on professional arts production, this view allows the cultural perspective to facilitate the democratic generation and expression of society's values and aspirations through creative participation.

LENS THREE: the creation, distribution and maintenance of POWER – the STRUCTURE: this is the Social Perspective

These days 'social' appears to be almost exclusively about the welfare of the disadvantaged, about the provision of services to those who cannot afford to pay for them themselves: public housing, public health, unemployment benefits, aged care ... (that is,

the stuff that present day economists can no longer be bothered with, or which they have been unable to find a way of privatising).

This is a terrible travesty of the concept of 'social'. A social perspective should focus on the organisational **structures** we have developed and the level of access to them, their capacity to deliver and the processes through which they are controlled and operated.

That is, the distribution of **power**; the processes of **governance**.

A social perspective should allow us to recognise that social organisation needs to be flexible and responsive, inclusive and engaging, open and transparent; that established structures and systems are neither 'natural' phenomena nor innately 'good' – they are the constructs of fallible humans with, inevitably, particular, often unacknowledged, interests. Constant vigilance is necessary, if we are to develop ways of organising ourselves that effectively fulfil our democratic aspirations. This should be the function and purpose of a social perspective.

In taking on a focus aimed at the efficient delivery of services (which should really be an economic matter), social policy makers have been denied their right to concern themselves with the democratic management of society.

LENS FOUR: the creation, distribution and maintenance of WEALTH – the PRODUCTION: this is the Economic Perspective

The economic domain has become exclusively about the efficient accumulation of material wealth. Again, this is a travesty of what was once a way of analysing public activity that concerned itself with a much wider concept of wealth than merely the fiscal and that focused as much on matters of equitable **distribution** as on modes of production. Not all that long ago economic policy was as much about fairness as it was about efficiency.

For the four perspectives to work effectively, this one needs to remember itself. In other words, to take back its distributive oversight.

In focusing on fiscal management and 'wealth creation', economic policy makers have renounced their responsibility to overseeing the equitable distribution of wealth – of furthering commonwealth.

The two critical matters arising out of this analysis are the pressing need for economic thinking to re-embrace issues of fairness, equity and distribution AND for social thinking to, once more, address issues of social structure and organisation.

With this template, governance becomes the essential element of the social perspective.

In this context it is reasonable to see the Four Perspectives as a contribution to the theory of public administration; as another model designed to improve the facilitation of public services.

But while it certainly is that, it is also much more. To my mind, it is also an important contribution to the project that has engrossed humankind for at least the last three hundred years - what might be called the Democracy Project: the probably endless challenge to find a way of governing ourselves that empowers and engages the entire body politic. It is in this context that issues of governance and engagement become paramount.

Let's start with an expression of the values that underpin the democracy we wish to live in. I imagine we all share a commitment to being actively involved in the development and maintenance of a society in which all citizens are respected, engaged, empowered and fulfilled as well as healthy, housed, well-fed, safe, and informed.

The second set of goals – health, shelter, sustenance, security and education - could, at least theoretically, be achieved under any political system. Indeed, from an historical perspective, what are known as command societies have consistently demonstrated a superior capacity in achieving these goals.

The first set of goals – respect, engagement, empowerment and fulfilment – would appear to be unique to systems that claim to be democratic.

Yet, so far, few democratic systems, and certainly not ours, have come close to achieving this first set of goals. Let alone in any sustainable fashion.

Intolerance, alienation, powerlessness and dissatisfaction have not been done away with. The democratic dream remains exactly that.

One of the chief reasons for this sorry state is that we have concentrated on achieving the second set (health, shelter, sustenance, security and education – often called the basics) in the belief that, if we get them right, then the first set (respect, engagement, empowerment and fulfilment) will inevitably follow.

This has not happened.

This ordering of social priorities has been further skewed by the elevation of 'material prosperity' to the top of the list. We need to recognise that economic development is merely one of a number of means for achieving other goals, rather than being an end in itself.

The primacy of economic imperatives is beginning, little by little, to be eroded: Local Agenda 21, Ecologically Sustainable Development and even the triple bottom line are conceptual attempts to get our priorities into an order that more closely reflects our democratic vision. Although, as I noted earlier, most of the energy has gone into trying to demonstrate the **economic** value of social and environmental matters, rather than demonstrating that there are other, more important values than the achievement of material prosperity.

And not only do we find ourselves in a society where the priorities are back to front, we're in one where the process of working out our priorities is back to front.

Last year, I attended a seminar, set up by the Victorian State Government, on community building. In reply to a question from a local government Councillor about what ongoing processes existed for communities to impact on State Government policy, the senior bureaucrat on the podium responded that the ballot box was the process. Political parties present platforms and the one that most of us like becomes policy.

Ticking a box once every three years is claimed to be the quintessence of democracy. No wonder so many of us feel alienated, powerless and dissatisfied.

The economic rationalists packed the command economy off to the dustbin of history; a culture in which social purpose and meaning are articulated in exactly the same, top down direction – a command culture - deserves the same fate.

In a vital society, the meaning we make of our lives is something we do together and continually, not an activity to be left to others, no matter how skilled, or representative, they may claim to be. Hiring experts is OK for getting the plumbing fixed, but not for establishing one's identity.

Politicians have begun to bemoan the apathy of the citizenry and to promote ways of re-engaging the body politic. This rhetoric will remain exactly that until they recognise that in an engaged democracy, the ideas they claim to want, actually emerge from community debate, from the constant, often fractious and difficult contestation of meaning at the base. Being offered a menu of barely differentiated options from above does not encourage engagement.

Active, continuing and democratic engagement with expressing purpose, with 'the plan', is the fundamental function of public culture.

A society that lacks forums for the democratic debate of values, meaning and purpose cannot be active, engaged and vital.

Understanding the function of culture in our society is the first step towards achieving the liveliness we say we are striving for.

One of the original meanings of culture, and one that still inhabits our use of the term, is the idea of growth, not in the sense of expansion or in the sense of progress but simply in the sense of being living. Taking this into account, the phrase 'cultural vitality' could be seen as a tautology; that is, vitality is the essence of culture, culture is alive and active or it is not culture.

But because so much of what we take to be culture these days is lodged in heritage artefacts, in dusty bones, it is important to highlight that culture finds expression, first and foremost, in human interaction, in the daily exchanges between people. It is this everyday (in both the sense of constancy and of ordinariness) social interaction that should be at the heart of a cultural perspective of public life.

At this point, I must pay tribute to the City of Port Phillip in Melbourne for transforming the thoughts of an obscure theoretician into a fullblooded corporate plan that elegantly extends the four perspectives across all their activities.

You may have noticed that, apart from when I mention my book, I have not been using the 'pillars' image. This also deserves attribution to the good folk at Port Phillip. When the staff there were introduced to the four pillars they immediately re-named them the four pillows. This classic way of coping with change is, in fact, much more than a great joke. What it made me realise was that the pillar image is a phallogocentric, engineering metaphor; in retrospect, completely inappropriate. The idea of wellbeing and sustainability resting on four pillows is a much better image. I wish I'd thought of it.

Unfortunately, neither pillows nor pillars immediately make one think of vitality. But then again, neither do perspectives, planning or policy.

And yet the rhetoric of public life is increasingly spiced with notions of energy – participation, engagement, vitality, vibrancy, activity, innovation, creativity.

It is very tempting to be cynical; to believe that all this talk of voluntarism, of social capital, of community capacity is merely a plot to reduce government expenditure, to turn public

service into private profit. That potential certainly exists, and there are definitely influential individuals and interests that have exactly that goal.

Despite this dark underbelly, I have to believe that we can seize the initiative; that, as the paucity, unfairness and destructiveness of economic rationalism becomes increasingly obvious, we can turn the rhetoric of community building to democratic advantage.

But the citizenry will not re-engage with the business of governance, with politics, unless they believe that this engagement will have an effect; that their contribution will be meaningful.

That is, until they feel empowered.

Which is why the notion of rights is so important. I am not naïve enough to believe that saying it makes it real, but I do believe that saying it gives one something to strive for, something to which actions can be called to account, something around which people can gather.

At the very least, if there were to be a formal declaration of cultural rights, we would be able to argue forcefully for an engaged cultural practice at the community level.

We need a formal statement of cultural rights:

- as an expression of the fundamental role that culture plays in the existence and maintenance of human society and the right of every human to contribute to and engage with that role;
- as a confirmation of culture's unique and essential function in helping us to understand and describe human behaviour, experience and aspirations;
- as an underpinning of the cultural perspective;
- as the validation of cultural impact to at least an equivalent level of importance as environmental, social and economic impacts; and as,
- the basis for accepting the exercise of creativity as a basic aspect of human life above and beyond its instrumental value in achieving secondary objectives.

In 1996, UNESCO declared six rights. These are the right:

- to cultural identity and heritage;
- to identify with a cultural community;
- to participate in cultural life;
- to education and training;

- to information; and,
- to participate in cultural policies.

Donald Horne has got it down to three, and has spent years talking them up. The rights he identifies are:

- to engage with human cultural heritage;
- to take part in new intellectual and artistic production; and,
- to find one's own forms of expression.

I've reduced it to one. The right:

- to actively participate in the social production of the values and aspirations that inform one's society.

The genuine acceptance and application of this right within the structures of governance, and by those in positions that allow them to influence the methodologies of these structures, would be a positive move towards a democracy that embraces and engages its citizens, their children and those who have come to our land in search of a better life.

Creative participation is the key to cultural vitality and the key to universal creative participation is access. I don't mean access to products and services (what could be called passive access) but access to the tools of production and the levers of power (that is, active access).

What are these tools?

In order for communities to achieve maximum engagement in creative participation, they need widespread and easy access to:

- **Time:** there are many options; for example – a shorter working week, mandatory arts elements in educational programs, paid time for cultural activities as a part of enterprise agreements;
- **Networks:** of common interest and experience, of support and sharing – networks that facilitate discovery, dissemination and promotion;
- **Information:** examples and models, guidelines to best practice, contact details;
- **Equipment:** the tangible materials and tools with which to make stuff;
- **Sites:** in which to work, to practice, to play, to experiment, to make and to show;
- **Facilitation:** people who are really good at liberating the creativity of others;

- **Skill development:** decentralised and local ownership of an ongoing skill-base;
- **Continuity:** 'access to continuity' may sound strange, but it is meaningful; communities need to be able to experience ongoing cultural engagement – stop-start projects can be counter-productive; and, finally,
- **Money:** although, if all of the foregoing resources were available to communities at a minimal cost to them, then perhaps money wouldn't be an issue at all.

Most communities could not hope to accumulate resources like this on their own: interventions are clearly needed.

The challenge for agents of governance is to ensure that the distribution of these resources is achieved in ways that make them accessible, productively used and, as far as possible, locally owned and sustainable.

If the tools of cultural production were to become universally accessible, the results would not simply be the universal and democratic exercise of cultural rights, but also a massive outburst of creativity.

Before galloping headlong away from the prospect of being inundated by waves of macrame, out of tune choirs, bad acting, soppy poetry and painted tea cups, we need to think a little about this increasingly bandied about term, creativity.

Its original use described a divine act: the creation of the world; that moment when nothing became something. When we became anthropocentric, we took upon ourselves this capacity, although we have continued to suspect that its source may lie beyond mortal ken. It certainly lies beyond the constructions of rationality, indeed in a rationalist world, creativity has come to describe functions that lie beyond rational calculation – which is why it's so important.

Making something out of nothing (ie out of thin air), intuitive leaps, inspiration, lateral thinking (reaching a conclusion that could not be rationally deduced), visitations by the muse – these are some of our ways of describing and interpreting creativity.

So, if culture describes how we make sense, and the results of that sense, then art describes that aspect of cultural action in which creativity and imagination are the key drivers, where we discover meaning and community in ways that are intuitive, irrational and unpredictable.

With the arts, we can imagine the future, unpack the past, confront the present. We can predict change, focus our visions and face our fears.

Unleashing the creative imagination can bring about the most extraordinary manifestations of vision and purpose, of dreams, of values and beliefs. Indeed, many have claimed that the arts are the primary language through which meaning is discovered, invented and contested.

Participatory arts describes empowered and hands-on community involvement in these processes. Its practice embodies the principle that we are all creative and that we all have a right, a responsibility and a desire to be actively involved in making our own culture. And that if we don't, it is inevitable that we will become alienated, disconnected and mightily pissed off.

There is a mass of research that demonstrates:

- that the insights and experiences participants gain through these activities make it easier for them to become better and more effective citizens;
- that utilising these practices in programs such as community education, community building, health promotion, cross-cultural understanding, etc, will enhance organisational responsiveness, delivery and flexibility; and
- that embedding these practices in the everyday processes of governance has the capacity to improve community engagement, communications, decision-making, policy development, expression of goals and evaluation.

So, on the one hand I'm saying that it is a basic democratic right that every community have access to the resources that will allow them to make art, to exercise their creativity, to make and express their own meanings.

On the other hand I'm saying that participatory arts is an invaluable instrumental tool:

- in the process of democratic governance;
- in the development of dynamic social communications;
- in the delivery of public services; and
- in the achievement of a wide range of social objectives, including, not least, the building of community.

The sort of long term sustainable social change that is really needed can **only** be achieved through the widespread application of participatory arts activities.

Why? Because collaborative creativity is at the foundation of forging identity and purpose. And without these, everything else is spin.

The source of this creativity is in the most abundant and fruitful resource that we have. It is a resource that isn't simply renewable – it's infinite.

It's our imaginations. And we all have imaginations and the right and responsibility to exercise them. Economic rationalism cannot guarantee a sustainable and healthy world, but we can imagine such a world and our combined creativities will help us to find our way there.

An acceptance that the notion of culture encompasses the breadth of meaning that I have described in this talk has inevitable consequences. These ideas have repercussions in the real world; accepting them will mean:

- abandoning a command culture;
- applying a cultural perspective to all policy;
- declaring and exercising cultural rights;
- recognising that creativity is both a universal right and a universal resource; and,
- ensuring that culture is not subsumed under other strategic imperatives.

The conditions in which these necessities can become reality lie in the mind and in the will.

Unless attitudes change, nothing else will. Unless the agents of governance are able to:

- trust in the creative capacity of communities;
- tangibly commit to democracy;
- be prepared to devolve control, and
- go beyond a service delivery model,

we will continue to spin in unproductive, and ultimately unsustainable, circles.

Thank you for listening.

The Fourth Pillar of Sustainability: culture's essential role in public planning is published by the Cultural Development Network of Victoria in association with Common Ground Publishing. Copies can be purchased from www.theHumanities.com

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