

Comments on Charles Landry's 'A Landscape of Urban Cultural Policies'

<http://www.comedia.org.uk/downloads/Cultural Policy Melbourne.doc>

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'the attempt by Melbourne to insert into corporate policy making the idea of culture as the fourth pillar of sustainability is a major innovation in policy development' (para1, p5).

is the conclusion of the first paragraph of the Preface, and:

'Incorporating the notion (of cultural sustainability) into corporate mission statements and goals would be extremely innovative and embed, perhaps for the first time, cultural considerations right across policy concerns thus helping at last to put culture centre-stage;' (para3,p36)

is the concluding paragraph of the paper. But, in between these two claims, CL does not really address the issue of maximising the creative participation of citizens in the determination of a city's goals and aspirations which is at the heart of the cultural perspective paradigm. The final section of the Appendix, on Antwerp, comes closest to embodying this approach in a real-life example.

A caveat

This is a really dense paper. CL probably knows more about urban cultural policies than any person alive and this paper demonstrates this. So the criticisms made below are from a perspective of immense respect (indeed, awe) for the author.

He is absolutely right when he concludes his Preface by saying that:

'Over the next decade it is likely that the economic approach to supporting culture will be challenged by educational, social and cultural arguments for culture' (para4,p5)

My hope was that the paper would go on to clearly demonstrate the nature of that challenge. I was disappointed to find that he has not done this anywhere near as coherently as he has elsewhere (eg in his book, *The Creative City*).

When is a city really a city?

The most pertinent issue in relation to the relevance that CL's examples may have to the City of Melbourne is structural. The City of Melbourne is a CBD with a population of around 40,000; none of the examples CL draws upon are.

Singapore is a nation state; Bilbao's development appears to have been initiated at the provincial government level (and the developments have occurred in the context of the entire metropolitan area); Toronto (of the examples, the city most similar to Melbourne) has been governed since 1998 by the Greater Toronto Area, an amalgamation of 7 metro municipalities. The other examples (Antwerp, Austin and Rotterdam) are similarly widely focused.

Furthermore, if one were to include Geelong in the 'greater Melbourne conglomeration' (which it is increasingly difficult not to do), at least 75% of the population of Victoria lives in this area. It is difficult, from this perspective, to get away from the fact that a plan for Melbourne (the 3.3m city, rather than the 40thsd CBD) needs to be a State Gov't initiative, and for what it's worth, is that not what 'Melbourne 2030' is meant to be?

It is faintly possible to imagine the 9 inner metro Councils (combined population 850,00) co-operating in the development of a unified vision; it is even more faintly possible (that is,

Comments on 'International Perspectives on Cultural Policies' (contd)

9/8/03

even less likely) to imagine the entire 31 metropolitan Councils coming together, let alone agreeing on anything.

All of which adds up to saying that the work that CL has put together is far more relevant to the State Government in its pursuance of a vision for Melbourne the urban conglomeration than it is to the City of Melbourne's role in governing the tiny bit in the middle.

Nevertheless, CL's work raises some really interesting issues, not least to do with the most useful operational definition of culture and its application within a local government context.

This can best be summed up in his observation that common practice is 'moving from the planning **of** culture to planning **for** culture'.

Continuing confusion and overlaps between arts and culture

Interestingly, despite his protestations to the contrary, CL still seems to maintain the 'arts and culture' mindset. He attempts to distinguish the two concepts at various points, but constantly slips back into referring to them as a combined package and/or highlighting 'arts' when presenting a cultural example or argument and vice versa.

Institutional focus

Understandably, he also exhibits a strong 'institutional' focus. There are constant references to cultural (and arts) institutions (and by this he is clearly referring to museums, libraries and galleries, but it is unclear whether he is also including, for example, large 'arts' bodies like theatre, dance and opera companies, orchestras, etc). There is also some confusion between the institution as a building and the institution as a maker and/or conservator of culture.

He talks often of the problems involved with major institutions having to deal with new agendas, for example of having to 'reflect the diversity of its populations' (para3,p9). While this is clearly a real problem, it is also an example of a centralised focus / mindset. Reflecting diversity may require the dispersal / decentralisation / devolution of major institutions, the development of alternate reflective surfaces so to speak, rather than transforming existing major institutions into ever more complex prisms.

Commonalities of cultural policy

He identifies 6 'trajectories' (p6-7):

- **'Arts for arts sake'**: he sees this as the 'civilising mission of culture' which is now being questioned in the context of diversity ('whose culture?'). He reckons the key question now, in this context, is, 'what are the qualities of quality'.

I think this misses the point. The most important issue here really is the democratic exercise of cultural rights. That is, the struggle to demonstrate that, regardless of culture's manifest value as an instrumental tool (educational, economic & social), citizens have an inherent, innate right, need and responsibility to be active agents in the making of the culture of which they are a part.

- **'The educational drive'**: his summary here is inadequate. Apart from leaping willy nilly between art and culture, his focus appears to be on learning about culture rather than on promoting the understanding that education is primarily a process of aculturation. That is, that education needs to be recognised as a subset of culture (it being a major setting in which meaning and values are passed on to new generations) rather than culture being a subset of education.
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Comments on 'International Perspectives on Cultural Policies' (contd)

9/8/03

- **'Accessibility and participation'**: he gets caught up in the accessibility versus quality debate, which, once again, is missing the real point. This 'trajectory' should really be about increasing the accessibility of culture-making tools that will allow citizens to creatively participate in culture making.
- **'The arts and economy'**: his critique is accurate, and there is no doubt that public cultural interventions are key initiatives in urban regeneration and as attractors of investment and visitors.

He correctly points out that:

'cultural production (has become to be) seen as a driver of cultural development rather than only focusing on cultural consumption'(para1,p7)

But he is really talking about industrial (and institutional) production rather than community production.

- **'The social inclusion agenda'**: I think his concept of social inclusion is a bit thin:

'social inclusion ... is concerned not only with access to provision, but also (with) how the arts enhance life-skills, employability, ... personal development ... (and) ... have positive impacts on ... crime, safety (and) tolerance for others. (para2,p7)

(this is a typical example of the confusion between arts and culture)

'social inclusion involves addressing the notion of dis-empowerment in that large swathes of the population are unable to make their histories, stories and visions part of contemporary culture' (para2,p7)

This is all fine, but it misses the 'connected' and 'belonging' aspects of inclusion – the cultural capital that we share that allows social capital to generate.

- **'The creativity agenda'**: once again art and culture get all mixed up and it ends up being about attracting people of talent rather than about liberating the creativity of the city's population.

In all of these trajectories, CL's main concern appears to be with the effect that developments have had on institutions. This is obviously important but I don't think it's the main game.

Trends and issues

CL states that the 3 'most significant trends' in cultural policy are 'managerialism, markets and evidence' (p8-9) (and once again plays the arts card as a counter to culture)

- **What to do about managerialism**: he notes that the new bosses of cultural institutions tend not to be artists (as they may have been in the past) but experts in economic, administrative and management fields. He claims that these fields are 'process rather than content driven and this is causing a backlash as quality and content issues rise to the fore'.

Either I am completely misunderstanding him or he doesn't get it.

I would have said 'product rather than process' or 'procedure rather than process' or 'transaction rather than content' and that the backlash is not so much about quality as about commodification or industrialisation or institutionalisation.

He implies that leadership programs are being developed in response to this backlash.

I ended up being very confused. Is he suggesting that these programs may solve the problem, if there is one? Anyway, it is a completely institutional focus, and in our real world, one with which State Gov't should grapple, not the City.

Comments on 'International Perspectives on Cultural Policies' (contd)

9/8/03

- **'(is it) possible to think beyond the market paradigm?'**: again he jumps from culture to art and remains anchored within the institution. His point about the limitations of market thinking when applied to public goods is on the button, but he confuses the issue by implying that 'curatorial and collecting roles' are legitimately market driven while educational roles are not. I'd be tempted to dispute both sides of this equation: clearly the neocons believe that education should be subject to market forces and I would have thought that there were excellent arguments to support curatorial and collecting functions as being public goods.

But my main beef is that, as with managerialism, he doesn't take the argument anywhere.

- **The demand for 'ever more detailed quantifiable evidence of culture's worth'**: he makes a useful distinction between 'hard' and 'soft' factors and notes the rapidly growing research into the soft. He notes the solid work being done by the UK DCMS in this area, suggesting perhaps that we should consider something similar. But, once again, his observations don't really take us anywhere.

Culture and urban regeneration

And here we are on CL's home turf. He knows this stuff better than anyone (p10-21)

- **'The urban regeneration repertoire'**: art/architecture as a branding tool to attract 'inward investment'. He notes that this 'often creates problems for locals' but that 'the argument is not clear cut' – sometimes it works.
- **'Icon mania'**: he notes that 'in reality there are very few (postwar) icons that have world recognition' (a case in point – the Guggenheim's Las Vegas franchise, which he mentions, recently closed through lack of punter interest). He points out that icons don't have to be buildings – they can be events, traditions, people, or even an atmosphere.

He notes Melbourne's apparent desire to iconise (iconify?) the entire city (by which he probably means the city centre).

And concludes with the 'growing worry' that we may be moving into 'icon overload'.

- **'Big is best'**: he critiques the gargantuan and suggests that better results may be achievable 'through a mass of well judged and well designed smaller interventions'.
 - **'Erasing memory or working with it'**: couple of mini case studies demonstrating creative ways of using a redundant industrial landscape to both celebrate heritage and revitalise identity (and attract thousands of tourists).
 - **'New art in old containers'**: excellent rationale for the refurbishment of old structures for contemporary cultural production.
 - **'Contents versus containers'**: he notes the common imbalance between edifice investment and activity investment. He wonders if cultural institutions can ever achieve the objectives that are being laid on them.
 - **'Gentrification'**: he notes that regeneration inevitably causes land/property values to increase to the point where artists can no longer afford to live or work in the precincts that they have played such an important part in bringing back from the dead. He suggest no solutions – perhaps it is always that fate of the artist to move on.
 - **'Retailing and the experience economy'**: retailers are beginning to understand that consumers are more active if they get entertained while they shop.
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Comments on 'International Perspectives on Cultural Policies' (contd)

9/8/03

- **'The experience debate'**: notes the increasing convergence between commercial institutions and cultural institutions as they both move towards a sort of edutainment model. He believes that the CIs can be an 'antidote to consumerism'.
- **'From buildings to quality of life'**: he sees this as a 'trajectory' – he implies that there is 'typical' path from massive physical investment that then is followed by an increasing focus on 'quality of life concerns'. He draws no conclusions as to the merit of this trajectory or to possible alternatives.
- **'The changing idea of cultural planning'**: excellent summary of where cultural planning is heading, perfectly summed up with a quote from the Antwerp material on the purpose of cultural planning (para2,p19)

'Cultural planning as a culture of city development is:

a culture of the space and of the infrastructure (the city buildings, the architecture, the aesthetic, etc);

a culture of administration (what is and what generates cleanliness, safety, completeness, etc);

the culture of the use of space to generate a sense of place;

the culture of determining meaning, identity and values;

the culture of involving the citizen, that is the recognition of eachone's civil rights and of the rights of minorities.'

- **'Rethinking city marketing'**:

'A growing view is that there is an important and potentially volatile difference between marketing products and services and marketing something as complex as 'place'.'

He uses Leicester, 'the most culturally diverse city in Britain' as a case study of marketing from a cultural perspective. It is a very useful example.

- **'From physical infrastructure via quality of life to cultural values'**: 'Different understandings of culture can be more appropriate at different stages of development of a city'. This conception of some sort of developmental progress during which culture performs different functions is not very convincing (it's certainly not argued through, instead just presented as a truth).
- **'The narrow thinking of the inward investment community'**: he gets near to the unspoken reality of much city policy making in this final section:

'the inward investment community for whom so much activity is ultimately geared'

He appears to accept this perspective as reasonable. The point of cultural policy (all policy?) is to attract investment. Seems arse about to me.

Concentrate on helping to make a city a great place to be – for its current occupants – and one can be confident that others will be attracted. Surely this is a better approach.

The creative industries

While identifying this concept as 'the flavour of the decade', he notes a range of problems when attempting to add this ingredient to public cultural policies:

- 'much of the output (of creative industries) is geared to international markets often losing its localness in the process'
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Comments on 'International Perspectives on Cultural Policies' (contd)

9/8/03

- That the problem with the creation and branding of 'cultural quarters' is that they become 'high cost location(s) ... attracting only established companies leaving the problem of incubators ... insufficiently addressed'
- He notes that creativity should be a concept that extends way beyond the arts: 'the objective of a creative city is to develop a culture of creativity in everything the city undertakes and the challenge is to provide the overall pre-conditions within which people can think, plan and act creatively'.

Unfortunately, he doesn't, at least at this stage, make any suggestions as to how these problems might be overcome.

Different models of dealing with cultural diversity

He identifies (based on the work of Bloomfield & Bianchini) 5 models:

- **Corporate multiculturalism:** dominant model in the UK since the 80s but discredited because of its tendency to view ethnic minorities as unified communities with monolithic (traditional) cultures, and to overlay them with a leadership of elders (usually male).
- **Civic cultural integration:** the French approach based on civic republicanism. The universalisation of rights is a plus but the assumption of universal 'Frenchness' has caused problems.
- **From the melting pot to ethnic essentialism:** the US approach that, while tipping the hat to civic integration has led to de facto segregation with gated communities of rich whites and ghettos for the others.
- **Interculturalism:** 'the pluralist transformation of public space'. Recognises culture(s) as a continuing process of exchange and hybridisation. Significant examples (especially in cities) in Canada, Denmark, France, Italy, the Netherlands and Portugal
- **Transculturalism:** 'transcend(ing) cultural differences through values which define and unify us as a species'. Can be banal, can lead to monocultural values being touted as universal, but can, if combined with an intercultural approach have positive outcomes.

CL, I believe correctly, argues for the intercultural approach.

Social inclusion debates

He correctly points out that the democratisation of culture strategy (which has 'underpinned British cultural policy since 1945') is nonsense. Bringing high culture to the masses has not worked.

He then critiques the use of cultural programming to achieve non-cultural objectives (eg addressing sickness, crime, unemployment) as alleviating symptoms rather than addressing causes.

He beautifully describes the way that dominant culture dominates.

He then leaps into a critique of museums, galleries and libraries (the institutional focus again) concerning their capacity to represent diversity, involve communities in determining program etc. These are extremely accurate criticisms (although there's not all that much that the City of Melbourne can do in response) but they focus on a very particular field.

The potential for public cultural interventions to stimulate civic engagement, particularly amongst those that feel marginalised is not raised.

9/8/03

The European Cultural Capital process as a policy making tool

Bit of a waste of time (other than it gives some language that might be pinchable). Is there any significance to the fact that neither Bristol nor Birmingham (the two he waxes lyrical about) got to be Britain's 2008 nomination – it went to Liverpool – I wonder what their submission was like?

A renewed public culture

He identifies 13 'dilemmas & issues' starting with:

'Moving from the planning of culture to planning for culture – setting the pre-conditions within which a vibrant culture can be expressed and developed' (final para, p33)

and concluding with:

're-orienting debate towards the idea that an overarching role of cultural policy is to help identify, harness, attract and sustain talent'

I think that this last 'issue' may say it all (that is, from CL's perspective). I strongly disagree with this as an 'overarching role' for a city's cultural policy. Firstly the concept of 'talent' is as problematic as excellence, quality, standards and all those other concepts used to justify the dominant culture. Secondly, a city is, first and foremost, its people – the ones who live and use it. A local government's first responsibility surely must be towards them. One might rephrase this 'issue' thus:

Reorienting debate towards the idea that an important role of cultural policy is to help unleash, channel and sustain the talents of its citizens and their offspring

Designing policy to 'attract' (whether it be talent, investment or tourists) is fundamentally pathetic. It is based on an assumption of inferiority, a belief that what we have already isn't good enough.

He synthesises these 13 dilemmas into a fourfold basis for 're-arguing what culture is for':

- **Culture's profound contribution to learning.** Culture 'is an antidote to formal learning'. This is a cute catchcry but is intellectually confused. There are more creative ways of passing on knowledge to the next generation than most of the ways that are currently used in schools; creativity itself is not something we are very good at 'teaching'. Ultimately, the point I'm making is that 'formal learning' is a key part of culture.
- **New roles for cultural institutions.** He understands and appreciates cultural institutions and would like to see them function more effectively, creatively, responsively. Good on him.
- **The power of the artistic imagination.** I am not at all sure about his claim of 'the role of the artist as the upholder of utopian ideas' (lots of other sorts of people are utopians and lots of artists aren't); BUT if one allows that the 'artistic imagination' is something that we all have the capacity, and the right, to exercise, then this argument makes good sense.
- **Necessity for cultural diversity.** By making the biodiversity::cultural diversity connection he nails it.

This is a pretty well argued position, but doesn't quite get there. These are four critical ways in which to present the case for a new cultural policy, but I have this suspicion that the deep connection hasn't been established.

9/8/03

Conclusion

Culture is such a useful and adaptable concept that we often forget that it actually describes the activities that are at the foundation of what it means to be human and is the basis of our capacity to live together. It is like that multi-purpose tool that the trendy gift shops sell, with so many instrumental functions that we lose sight of its essence.

Culture (and, consequently, art) manifests the adaptability of its makers: it can be a community service, it can be a marketing tool, it can be the cloak of confidence for those with a civilising mission, it can be a chapter in the Planning handbook, it can promise riches for the market obsessives, it can be the catchcry of the creative industry proponents, it can be a formidable tool for rebuilding cities.

It is this last role that CL understands better than any. He is the world leader when it comes to knowing how art can contribute to urban regeneration. But when it comes to cultural policy he is in danger of getting lost in the forest. He can identify individual trees but seems to miss the wider picture.

After travelling around the world, let's return to the banks of the Yarra. The State Government, quite properly, has a vision for the development of the Melbourne metropolis. It is appropriate that the CBD local government authority contribute to this vision, and commissioning CL to assess the policies of other big cities is a reasonable move in that direction.

However, in the context of what the CoM's own cultural policy should be, the paper is not all that useful. CL mentions some of the work of the UK's DCMS; one aspect he neglects to mention is its efforts to encourage local government authorities to develop cultural strategies and its development of models / approaches for them to consider.

But this is not big picture, high profile stuff.

I suspect that with this paper, we are drifting into big fantasy land – looking for justifications for major projects with world shattering impacts. CL is correct when he opines that:

'Incorporating the notion (of cultural sustainability) into corporate mission statements and goals would be extremely innovative and embed, perhaps for the first time, cultural considerations right across policy concerns thus helping at last to put culture centre-stage;' (para3,p36)

although, in fact, many LGs are already doing this (eg Port Phillip). Let's cop it sweet that in Victoria, Australia the cultural responsibilities of the LG authority are to maximise the happiness and survival (otherwise known as wellbeing and sustainability) of its constituency and get on with it. Perhaps the most useful model to examine in closer detail is that of Antwerp:

'we must not plan and guide the culture or the city; we must be conscious of the preconditions and must create and manage these in such a way that the culture of and for the city's residents and visitors, in short the users, can thrive'.

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Comments on 'International Perspectives on Cultural Policies' (contd)

9/8/03

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