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Culture and Museums in the Winds of Change: The Need for Cultural Indicators

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Article abstract

How individuals live their lives, within the context of personal and collective values, expresses their living culture. Societies may be made up of people with different ethnocultural backgrounds, socio-economic profiles or spiritual orientations, but they share certain common cultural frameworks (e.g., democratic governance, rules of law, conventions of business, principles of equity for all, etc.) of what is increasingly a globalized, pluralized, and urbanized present. Culture is often thought of as either the historical traditions of a group, or else as certain types of activities (e.g., dance, theatre, celebrations, rituals, etc.) and objects (e.g., art, artifacts, clothing, etc.). Meanwhile, cultural organizations are characterized as specialized places of expertise that provide selected kinds of experiences and services to the public – normally available for consumption during leisure time. This article argues that the heart of living culture is to be found not in specialized types of objects, leisure-time experiences, ethnocultural traditions, or cultural organizations but, rather, in its processes of human adaptation in a changing world. The author uses the lens of culture to examine how humanity understands and attempts to manage change within its sphere of influence. How can we best measure the cultural well-being of our societies, our organizations, and ourselves? The overarching notion of global/local sustainability provides the grounding point for considering how best to foster a 'culture of sustainability'.

Culture and Museums in the Winds of Change: The Need for Cultural Indicators[1]

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Abstract: How individuals live their lives, within the context of personal and collective values, expresses their living culture. Societies may be made up of people with different ethnocultural backgrounds, socio-economic profiles or spiritual orientations, but they share certain common cultural frameworks (e.g., democratic governance, rules of law, conventions of business, principles of equity for all, etc.) of what is increasingly a globalized, pluralized, and urbanized present. Culture is often thought of as either the historical traditions of a group, or else as certain types of activities (e.g., dance, theatre, celebrations, rituals, etc.) and objects (e.g., art, artifacts, clothing, etc.). Meanwhile, cultural organizations are characterized as specialized places of expertise that provide selected kinds of experiences and services to the public – normally available for consumption during leisure time. This article argues that the heart of living culture is to be found not in specialized types of objects, leisure-time experiences, ethnocultural traditions, or cultural organizations but, rather, in its processes of human adaptation in a changing world. The author uses the lens of *culture* to examine how humanity understands and attempts to manage change within its sphere of influence. How can we best measure the cultural well-being of our societies, our organizations, and ourselves? The overarching notion of global/local sustainability provides the grounding point for considering how best to foster a 'culture of sustainability'.

Keywords: Museums, cultural well-being, culture and sustainability, adaptive renewal, cultural indicators

Résumé : La manière dont les individus vivent leur vie, en fonction de valeurs personnelles et collectives représente une manifestation de leur culture. Les sociétés sont construites d'individus aux origines ethnoculturelles, socioéconomiques et spirituelles diverses, mais elles partagent néanmoins un schème culturel commun (e.g. gouvernance démocratique, droit, conventions d'affaire, principe d'équité pour tous, etc.) qui reflète un monde globalisé, pluriel et urbanisé. La culture est souvent envisagée en tant que traditions historiques d'un groupe, ou encore, en tant qu'un certain registre d'activités sociales (e.g. dance, théâtre, célébrations, rituels, etc.), voire en tant qu'objets (e.g. art, artefacts, vêtements, etc.). Pendant ce temps, les

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organisations culturelles se sont constituées en des espaces sociaux où qui procurent certaines expériences and services au public – normalement disponible sous forme de loisir à consommer. Cet article suggère que la culture ne se réduit pas aux artefacts, aux loisirs, aux traditions ethnoculturelles ou encore aux organisations culturelles, mais plutôt, elle serait reconnaissable dans les processus d'adaptation à un monde changeant. Les auteurs utilisent la notion de culture pout comprendre comment l'Humanité appréhende et tente de changer sa sphère d'influence. Comment pouvons-nous mesurer le bien-être culturel de nos sociétés, de nos organisations et de nos êtres? La question centrale du développement global et du développement local représente le point d'ancrage de cette réflexion sur les stratégies permettant de créer une culture du développement durable.

Mots clé : musées, bien-être culturel, adaptation, changement, indicateurs culturels

Introduction

In this day and age, one thing seems increasingly clear, at least in industrialized countries. Human beings have created cultures that are unsustainable.[2] From the uncertain implications of climate change, to the realities of a global economic melt-down and the growing gap between rich and poor, there are few indications that a human population of over 6.5 billion can continue to survive, let alone thrive, on planet Earth. As humanity proceeds down the path of globalization, pluralization, and urbanization, there is a niggling question: Can we create a global/local 'culture of sustainability'? If so, what might it look like? How do we move towards it? How do we know if we are getting closer, or drifting ever further from this goal?

The question of culture

Culture, like *sustainability*, is a term that has come to mean different things to different people.[3] Most would agree that history, art, language, food, music, and clothing are all part of what we mean by the word *culture* – especially when these attributes have a tradition that stretches back through the generations. Certain types of leisure-time organizations (like museums, galleries, theatres, etc.) are commonly thought of as *cultural* because they specialize in selected aspects of human endeavour that are associated with culture (art, artifacts, music, dance, etc.). Further, in our increasingly pluralistic world, culture is often linked to ethno-cultural countries of origin. Within all these approaches to culture, there is a tendency to point towards the past and 'the other', usually at the expense of seeing that culture envelops each of our communities on a day-to-day basis. Culture may include traditions and the past, and it may even include trips to museums and other leisure-time edutainment organizations; however, first and foremost, culture is the living, changing dynamic of how we live our lives, individually and collectively, locally and globally, consciously and unconsciously.

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[2] Many authors have reflected on this problem, including AtKisson (1999), Hawkes (2001), Jacobs (2004), Wright (2004), Diamond (2005), Homer-Dixon (2005), and Schafer (2008).

[3] Over the centuries, many scholars and thinkers have tackled the challenge of defining culture. See, for instance, Hawkes (2001) and Schein (2001).

With a professional background of over 30 years in the museum sector, as well as a recent preoccupation with the intersection between culture and sustainability/unsustainability, my purpose in this paper is two-fold: first, to examine some of the larger 'cultural' issues related to sustainability in a globalized, pluralized, and urbanized world; and secondly, to explore how museums and other cultural organizations can position themselves to play a more meaningful role in helping to foster a 'culture of sustainability'.

One of the hallmarks of the modern era has been the fragmenting of the world into areas of specialization. This technique has yielded huge rewards for humanity. Unprecedented advances in knowledge have led to a society of specializations – each one, more often than not, a silo unto itself. Through focused and deep study, engineering, medicine, transportation, finance, and other domains have pushed the limits of what is possible to understand and to do. Yet, something is missing. Humanity lacks a global cultural vision of where it is going as a holistic system within the constraints of the biosphere. Central to grappling with the challenge and the opportunity of global sustainability, is a close look at the term *culture*.

Cultural insights from a Maori elder

Since my background is rooted in museums, I will share a short story about how my understanding of the term *culture* was re-shaped through an intercultural experience with a Maori elder. In 1993, I was invited to Australia and New Zealand to deliver a series of lectures and workshops on my research into visitor-based creativity at the Art Gallery of Ontario, which focused on the creativity of museum visitors. Through this work, I had begun to think about museums as 'places of the muses'. Of course the museum was a physical place, but my interest was rooted in a state of mind of visitors that has psychological, social, and even spiritual dimensions. In this place of creativity, a person reflects upon aspects of their lives that they normally do not think much about – opening themselves up to the emergence of new insights. Nurturing creative responses of visitors to artworks frequently generated psychic energy that often surprised and delighted viewers. This research suggested that cultural professionals would benefit from developing an appreciation of visitor-based creativity to complement the work they do on artist-based creativity (see Worts 1995, 2005), and had captured the interest of staff at the Te Papa Museum in Wellington, New Zealand. Two Maori elders, both of whom worked at the museum, attended the workshop I gave, and the time I spent with one of the elders, Bessie Walters, would contribute to fundamentally changing my understanding of culture.

After the workshop, I was invited by 'Auntie Bessie' to spend the following morning with her in the Maori gallery. When I walked into the museum to meet her, I did not know exactly what to expect. As I entered the cavernous space at the museum entrance, the magnificent objects before me – including huge ocean-faring canoes, houses, sculptures and more – awed me. Across the room, Bessie waved me over and extended a warm welcome. Then she turned to a life-sized, wooden sculpture and introduced it as an ancestor. My look must have betrayed my confusion as to what to do or say next – how should one respond to being introduced to a wooden carving? There was a twinkle in Bessie's eye as she said, 'you can't just stand there, you need to touch him'. Confusion turned to nervousness as an inner voice said, 'you are a museum professional… you know that artifacts are *not* to be touched, at least not without cotton gloves!' With a twinkle in her eye, Bessie

took my hands and planted them on the wooden carving, saying that I could not just stand there but had to 'caress' the figure. At that point I knew I had begun a cultural experience unlike any I had had before. For the next three hours, Bessie and I explored the museum's extensive collection of Maori *taonga* (treasures) – touching everything as we proceeded. I learned how these objects embodied the living energy of Maori ancestors – not simply representations of people from the past, but the ancestors themselves. Bessie spoke of her relationship to them – that she was part of a continuum. She told me that her ancestors had come to the land, now known as New Zealand, centuries earlier and had killed the original inhabitants of the islands. When she declared that she reflected every day on how the responsibility for her ancestors' actions now rested on her shoulders, I was thunder-struck. At that moment, I gained an insight into the saying that culture involves 'standing on the shoulders of ancestors'.

It seems increasingly important to recognize how we, as individuals, do not arrive at the lives we live only through our personal experiences and choices. Rather, we are largely defined by the values, attitudes, beliefs, and deeds of those who preceded us. In our contemporary world, especially in the West, individual lives seem so focused on the challenges and opportunities of the present that we think of the past as largely irrelevant. And yet, for much of human history, it has been a combination of wisdom, rooted in the experiences and insights of elders, coupled with the contemporary challenges and connections of the younger generation, that have enabled cultures to grow and change. In contrast, today's society tends to privilege the knowledge associated with expertise more than the wisdom that comes from a lifetime of human experience. The morning I spent with Auntie Bessie has reverberated within my changing perspective of culture for almost 20 years, and will probably continue to do so for years to come.

Redefining culture

So, what do we mean by the term *culture*? American psychologist Edgar Shein (2002) has posited that culture is "a basic pattern of assumptions invented, discovered or developed by a given group as it learns to cope with its problems of external adaptation and internal integration" (p. 40). To think about culture as a process of active adaptation and integrated consciousness helps enormously to overcome the limitations of culture being understood as entirely rooted in the past, or being associated with a class of contemporary edutainment/entertainment that only exists in leisure-time contexts (see UNESCO 1995, Galla 2002, Worts 2006a, Sutter 2006, and Janes 2009). In the light of Shein's definition, all activities of human endeavour, including economic systems, social dynamics, and relationships with the natural environment, become important foundation blocks of our evolving and increasingly globalized culture. This approach leaves us wondering about how the dynamics of culture play themselves out in day-to-day reality, and what the idea of culture as an adaptive process might mean for museums and other cultural organizations. To begin, it is worth examining the dynamics of adaptation.

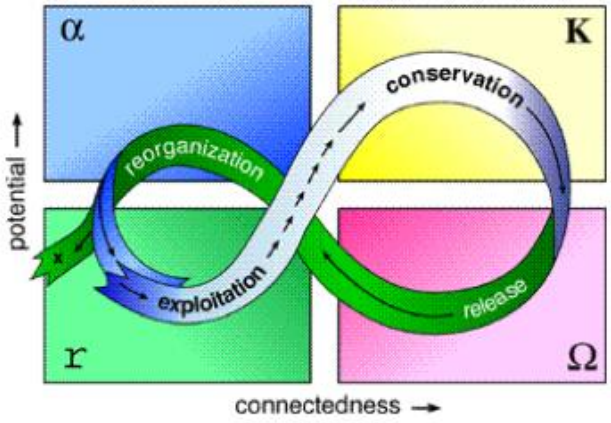
Adaptive renewal

The work of C.S. (Buzz) Holling, a biologist and central figure in the study of complex systems, offers a model that may be extremely helpful to those trying to understand culture in our contemporary world. Holling began his work on *adaptive renewal* by studying forest ecosystems

over a period of five decades, and saw a predictable pattern emerge that has become known as the *adaptive renewal cycle*. Essentially, there are four parts to the cycle: exploitation, conservation, release, and reorganization (see Figure 1). Holling (2004) writes:

> For an ecosystem such as a forest, think of the century- or centuries-long cycle of succession and growth from pioneer species (r) to climax species (K) followed by major disturbances such as fire, storm, or pest (Ω). Such disturbances occur as wealth accumulates and the system becomes gradually less resilient, i.e., more vulnerable. As a consequence, a disturbance is created to release accumulated nutrients and biomass and reorganize them into the start of a new cycle (α). That reorganization can then exploit the novelty that accumulates but is resisted or lies latent during the forward loop. (no page)

Figure 1. The adaptive renewal cycle



Source: Holling (2004)

Adaptive renewal applies to human situations as well as to natural ecosystems. For example, when two compatible people meet through a chance encounter they seize the opportunity and begin to build a relationship – this is the phase in which they explore the potential as a couple (*exploitation*). Tremendous energy is often produced during the early phase of a relationship, not only physically, but also emotionally and psychologically. The second phase (*conservation***)**, involves the growing complexity of the relationship. Resilience is created to help protect the system from being disrupted or destroyed by external shocks. In an evolving human relationship, domestication and routine often set in during the 'mature' phase of the cycle, with all of the complexity that can entail. Throughout this phase, threats and pressures from outside (and inside) the system will try to disrupt the equilibrium. Invariably, the third phase (*release***)** will appear. Here, the relationship will be confronted with a variety of crises that lead either to a letting go of certain old attitudes, or to a collapse. In the former, the relationship attempts to creatively adapt, while in the latter, the relationship disappears, leaving both parties free to look opportunistically at the range of options available in the larger social context (*reorganization*).

Other social examples of adaptive renewal can be found in the dynamics of career-development. Here, it is possible for someone to experience many adaptive restructurings of their

career over a period of years or decades. In other instances, a career path may be abandoned when external conditions (or the development of a new inner passion) converge which encourages a complete break with one's established career, leaving that person to explore and exploit other options.

One can also see the hallmarks of adaptive renewal at the macro societal level. An example of this is in the use of energy. When human beings discovered that the power of fire could be harnessed through burning wood, there were countless benefits to be gleaned. However, eventually, energy from burning wood became problematic in a number of ways and societies became open to the opportunities made available by burning coal. This opened the door to the industrial revolution, which had profound impacts on people in every corner of society. Yet problems with pollution and the desire to achieve goals that required liquid fuel soon led to the decline of coal and the ascent of oil and gasoline. As with both wood and coal-based fuels, petroleum fuels enjoyed tremendous opportunistic integration into the fabric of human lifestyles. And after a century of wildly successful exploitation, the pressures of climate change and pollution are conspiring to topple oil from its pre-eminent perch as the fuel of choice.

Culture as an adaptive process

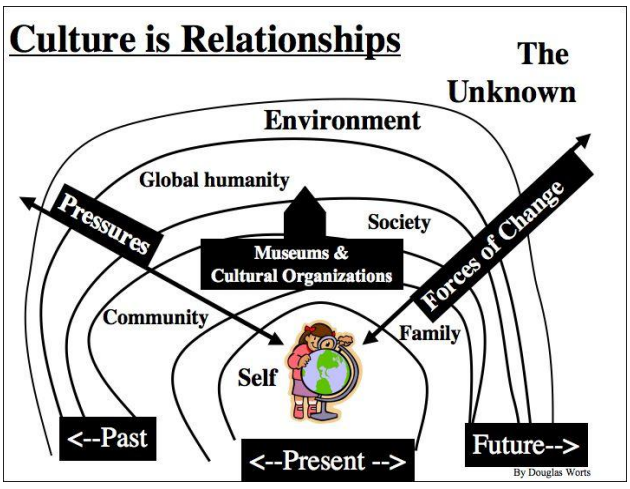
If we look at the notion of culture as an adaptive process, then it is critical to pay attention to the ever-changing contexts within which humans live. To this end, our society's dependence on, even addiction to, energy is a defining characteristic of our culture. Similarly, the age we live in, which has facilitated revolutions in transportation, communication, and production technologies, is central to who we are individuals and collectives. The mass migration of huge populations – primarily as seen as movement from the country to the city and/or from one's region of ethno-cultural roots to urban settings in other parts of the world – further defines human culture in the early years of the twenty-first century. One of the outcomes of this migration has been the pluralization and urbanization of a great many human settlements.

Whereas historically human beings have lived within relatively local precincts, for the past few centuries, the entire planet has increasingly become humanity's frame of reference. Driven by technological advances, as well as the expansion of global markets for goods and services, the very nature of human culture is transforming. It is not that traditional notions of ethno-cultural identity rooted in the heritage of a particular place have become irrelevant, but that identity has become considerably more complex and layered through processes of globalization. Another central aspect of identity today is linked to urbanization and the emergence of a society largely defined by the pragmatic forces of economy and other dimensions of secular life. Whereas traditional cultures spent a great deal of time and energy struggling to relate to the many aspects of life that remain mysterious and unknown (often taking the form of religion), secular society largely ignores what it cannot control through economics, expertise, and brute force. It is in this context that I developed my own definition of *culture* to help clarify the cultural challenges that lie ahead:

> Culture [is] … all of the ways in which a people relate to those aspects of life which:
> a) they can know and control; as well as,
> b) those they can't fully know or control, but to which they must have a conscious relationship. (Worts 2002)

To suggest that culture is fundamentally a dynamic of relationships is not novel. However, as one lays out the various ways in which humans build their networks of relationships, the challenges of creating a sustainable, globalized culture becomes clearer (see Figure 2). Modern societies governed by secular laws, democratic processes, and market-driven frameworks seem to have lost a sense of humility that comes from grappling with the mysterious power of the universe that is beyond human understanding and control. Such humility could help to ensure that the 'precautionary principle' is applied to many aspects of contemporary life where the impacts of actions can reverberate across the planet with barely a flicker of general consciousness. For example, in the current phenomenon of climate change – where the burning of extraordinary quantities of fossil fuels has set off a chain of events that is raising the temperature of the planet – many of the impacts or causal relationships are not easy to document, which has been why the International Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) has only recently linked human activity and changing climate. Yet for many the IPCC declarations on climate change are not sufficient to accept the call for fundamental changes to human behaviour, especially those related to energy systems and consumption behaviours. I've come to believe that what is needed is a new framework for cultural identities that enables each of us to stretch our individual consciousness to embrace not only personal and local realities, but also the global reality. Globalized economics, systems of product manufacturing, and unfettered mobility are linking each of us to every corner of the planet. Accordingly, there is a need for each of us individually, as well as through our collective systems, to become more conscious of the ramifications of those connections. In turn, it is essential to modify our individual and collective behaviours so that each of us contributes to a sustainable world for all people, within a biosphere that has limitations.

Figure 2. Culture is relationships

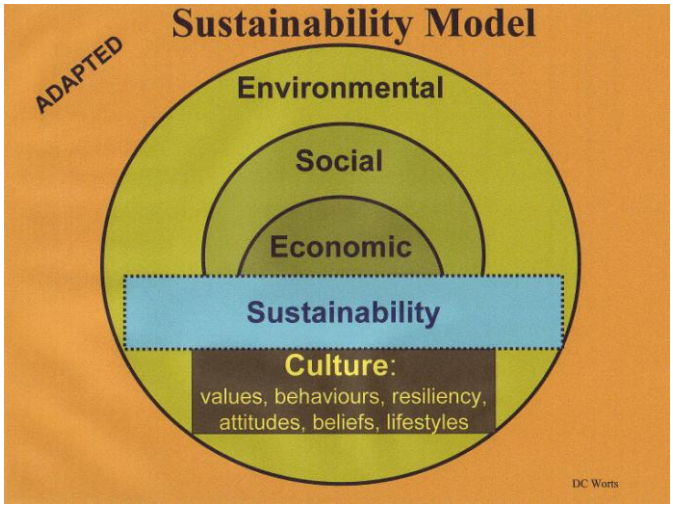


The diagram in Figure 2 suggests myriad ways that individuals and collectives are linked to other elements of our world. Some of our relationships exist consciously, while others are unconscious. In a situation where over 6.5 billion people must share the resources of a limited

planet, it only seems appropriate that humanity be conscious and responsible in how these relationships are lived.

The argument being put forward here is that *culture* is the foundation of human values, beliefs, attitudes, and behaviours that make up our lived reality (see Figure 3). As such, the classic model of sustainable development, which includes three equal, overlapping spheres (environment, society, and economy), can be re-envisioned as showing three differently scaled spheres, resting on the foundation of culture.[4]

Figure 3. Sustainability model, adapted to include role of culture



Culture and sustainability

Many people have criticized the classic sustainability model because all human life, including the economy, exists wholly within the biosphere – which is why, in Figure 3, it is the largest and all-encompassing sphere. As a sub-set of the environment, *society* must leave room within the environment for the countless other species that belong to Earth's biosphere. The smallest sphere is set aside for the economy. Represented in this way, the economy is put into a more balanced perspective with society and environment. It is ironic that the economy, which is a tool of society, has for over a century been widely accepted as a more significant indicator of societal well-being than either the general welfare of people or the health of the natural environment. The novel addition here is the placement of the societal and economic spheres on the foundation of culture, within which are the values, attitudes, beliefs, and behaviours that direct human activity.

A natural question emerges: What specifically is contained within the 'cultural foundation' in this model?[5] While not an exhaustive list, a 'culture of sustainability' could include the following continuously evolving capacities, at individual and collective levels:

[4] There are numerous instances of recasting the classic sustainability model as embedded spheres.

[5] This approach to integrating culture into the sustainability model places culture as a foundation for all other human activity, which differs from Jon Hawkes' use of a 'fourth leg' to balance out economy, environment,

- Capacities for reflectiveness
- Capacities for participation/engagement in what is relevant
- Capacities for treating others with equity, trust, and respect
- Capacities for creating a vision of how humans can live sustainably on the Earth
- Capacities for relatedness – compassionate connection to others and to the environment
- Capacities for awareness of histories – and an ability to learn from the past
- Capacities for creativity – to have faith in it personally
- Capacities for conscious systems of knowledge, including values
- Capacities for connection to the symbolic and the spiritual
- Capacities for humility and conscious connection to what cannot be fully understood or controlled
- Capacities for responsible action
- Capacities for ability to embrace change.

These are just some of the critical aspects needed to foster a 'culture of sustainability' in a world that is facing serious challenges of spiraling population, environmental degradation, and huge social inequities. This list of cultural capacities make the traditional criteria for judging impacts of cultural strategies – where 'success' is typically measured in terms of attendance and revenue – seem particularly inadequate.

In fact, contemporary cultures have so far failed to develop effective measures that can identify and address the cultural, social, economic, and environmental needs of a quickly and dramatically changing world. Meanwhile, over the past century or two, globalizing economic, manufacturing, and market systems have dramatically transformed how humans inhabit the world. This has been a work in progress for many centuries – heralded by the adventures of early European traders and explorers. In the twentieth century, the military and economic alliances that followed the two World Wars further strengthened the interconnectedness of all humans who share this planet. Yet the resulting social, economic, and cultural elements of globalization have not produced effective feedback loops that could adjust and curtail their most destructive aspects.

Cultural dimensions of the economy

Driven by the powerful motivation of maximized economic growth and profit, corporations, governments, and influential individuals have pushed the economy to the forefront of all human considerations. There seems to be little disagreement that our current world is unsustainable, but unless we change the values that guide our economic systems, the future will not be kind – environmentally, socially, economically, or culturally.

There are economists who challenge the dominant growth-based economic approach to human well-being. In Canada, Mark Anielski (2007) and Peter Victor (2008) strongly argue that to focus on simple economic growth is not only destructive for humanity and the planet, but that privileging growth misses the real power of the economy to create a sustainable world. In the United States,

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and society. Positioning culture in a foundational position ensures that it is seen as inextricably bound to all aspects of human life and is not split off as a set of separate concerns.

Herman Daly (1973, 2008) has been a strong voice for a 'steady-state economy' for decades. Daly recently called for a re-tooling of the global economy:

> The Earth as a whole is approximately a steady state. Neither the surface nor the mass of the earth is growing or shrinking; the inflow of radiant energy to the Earth is equal to the outflow; and material imports from space are roughly equal to exports (both negligible).… The most important change in recent times has been the enormous growth of one subsystem of the Earth, namely the economy, relative to the total system, the ecosphere…. The closer the economy approaches the scale of the whole Earth the more it will have to conform to the physical behavior mode of the Earth. That behavior mode is a steady state—a system that permits qualitative development but not aggregate quantitative growth. Growth is more of the same stuff; development is the same amount of better stuff (or at least different stuff). The remaining natural world no longer is able to provide the sources and sinks for the metabolic throughput necessary to sustain the existing oversized economy—much less a growing one…. Throughput growth means pushing more of the same food through an ever larger digestive tract; development means eating better food and digesting it more thoroughly. Clearly the economy must conform to the rules of a steady state—seek qualitative development, but stop aggregate quantitative growth. (Daly 2008, p.1)

But it is not only economists who are ringing the bell for economic review and change – artists, scientists, theologians, and even some business people are doing so as well.

The role(s) of artists in fostering cultural change

In this section, I have chosen to highlight three figures in the art world whose artworks provide compelling feedback loops that are helping to shift aspects of our Western cultural unconscious towards consciousness.

Edward Burtynsky, a Canadian photographer, has produced artwork around the world that brings a magnifying glass to the places where industry, society, economics, and environment intersect. One powerful series of photos depicts the collateral costs of decades of trans-oceanic shipping of goods. Burtynsky wondered what happened to old freighters after they could no longer sail the seas safely. He found some of them on the beaches of Bangladesh, where local business 'entrepreneurs' purchased the vessels for next to nothing. Then hundreds of local people, keen to earn money, would use cutting torches to disassemble the metal hulks. These workers were provided no safely equipment (like goggles or gloves) and frequently worked without shoes. The artist was so horrified by the situation that he purchased 2,000 pairs of safety goggles and gave them to the business owner to distribute to the workers. For anyone who takes for granted the availability of cheap goods, frequently made in developing countries with little or no employment or environmental regulations, seeing one of Burtynsky's images is a wake-up call.[6]

Chris Jordan, a Seattle-based artist, uses computer-manipulated images to make beautiful, but shocking mirrors on product and service consumption in the United States.[7] Swedish artist Jenny Bergstrom has created a compelling artwork for public spaces that is designed to alert commuters to

[6] See Edward Burtynsky's work at: www.edwardburtynsky.com. Specifically, see 'Works: Ships: Ship-Breaking'.

[7] See artwork by Chris Jordan at: www.chrisjordan.com. The section on 'Running the Numbers: An American Self-Portrait' is particularly powerful.

the largely invisible threat of air pollution.[8] Yet the integration of such artistic work into mainstream life in ways that can create meaningful change remains is largely undeveloped. It may be possible for cultural organizations to do more than simply exhibit their work. Perhaps museums could develop strategies to insert the reflective practices and potent feedback of insightful artists into the very decision-making process of government, business, and civil society. Currently, this is undeveloped potential. To move this agenda forward, cultural organizations need to broaden their frame of reference and develop new ways of measuring cultural needs.

Globalized culture

Globalization is here to stay and now part of humanity's cultural reality. There is little doubt that globalization can deliver many benefits, but there are many hidden aspects of global economics and business that, if allowed to continue unchecked, will prove deleterious to the health of all. Monitoring and feedback systems are needed so that governments, businesses, non-profit organizations, and individual citizens can monitor how actions at all levels send both positive and negative ripple effects across the planet.

How will the colossal task of forging a global, sustainable culture of humanity be undertaken? Is it possible to stretch human consciousness from the individual scale to the local/regional world of everyday life, and then beyond to the global realities of our contemporary world? Who will be part of the crafting of a global framework for a 'culture of sustainability' that not only respects the heritage of each individual, but also brings everyone together in the spirit of peace and happiness for all? I remain optimistic that human ingenuity is capable of rising to meet such challenges head-on – although it may well take some significant crisis to precipitate this type of meaningful societal change.

Cultural feedback loops and indicators

If we acknowledge that a successful future for humanity will require fostering 'a culture of sustainability,' then what roles might we envision for cultural organizations like museums? Such institutions contain a great deal of embedded capital – not only in their collections and buildings, but also in their staffs and volunteers. Yet few have embraced the cultural challenges of sustainability. Nonetheless, there is a growing movement that is encouraging museums to focus more on the needs of their communities and the issues confronting humanity. The Canadian Working Group on Museums and Sustainable Communities[9] has developed a planning tool to help museums seize the opportunities available to them through embracing the sustainability challenge. The Critical Assessment Framework (Figure 4) uses a stratified approach that helps planners develop public engagement strategies designed to address the needs and opportunities related to: individuals, communities, the museum itself, and the global reality (Worts 2006b).

[8] See Jenny Bergstrom's artwork that addresses the issue of air pollution, at: www.jennybergstrom.com/scripts/Page.asp?id=297

[9] For more information on the Working Group on Museums and Sustainable Communities, see: http://worldviewsconsulting.org/?page_id=47.

Figure 4. Critical Assessment Framework

Critical Assessment Framework

Douglas Worts & Glenn Sutter - WorldViews Consulting – Apr/2008

Criteria for assessing initiatives aimed at 4 levels of cultural adaptation

(Rating performance without indicators is subjective. Discussions are useful and will generate criteria.)

When considering a new public program initiative, ask how well the program will:	Poorly 1	2	to 3	4	Well 5	N/A
Personal Level (members of community)						
Contribute and/or generate new insights						
Capture imagination						
Stimulate curiosity						
Encourage personal reflection						
Enhance ability to think critically and creatively						
Provide opportunity to examine and clarify values						
Demonstrate relevance and make connection to daily life						
Affirm, challenge, deepen identity						
Help develop a sense of place						
Help deal with complexity and uncertainty						
Increase responsible action						
Stimulate intrinsic motivation						
Community Level						
Address vital and relevant needs / issues / opportunities within community						
Generate information and connection at the personal, community, provincial/territorial, national and global level						
Engage a diverse public						
Provide a voice for diverse groups						
Encourage social interactions and debate						
Act as a catalyst for action						
Stimulate intergenerational interactions						
Link existing community groups to one another						
Initiate or enhance long term collaborative relationships						
Partnerships empower community groups						
Enhance the credibility of all involved						
Result in products and processes that have tangible impact in the community						
Institutional Level						
Challenge personal and institutional assumptions						
Guided by clearly articulated goals, objectives and outcomes						
Use the most effective vehicle for achieving goals						
Create a community of learning within staff						
Integrate scientific, local and traditional knowledge						
Act as catalyst for partnering community organizations						
Global Level						
Address issues of global significance – revealing links to local realities						
Foster global ecosystem health						
Reduce global ecological footprint						
Enhance global social justice and equity						
Foster public consciousness of global impacts of local choices						

For elaboration, see: Worts, Douglas, "Measuring Museum Meanings: A Critical Assessment Framework", Journal of Museum Education, vol 31, #1, Spring 2006, Walnut Creek, California: Left Coast Press, pp. 41-49

When considering a range of possible public program options, members of a planning team can use the Critical Assessment Framework to ask themselves whether the various strategies under consideration are capable of achieving certain goals. The questions are not intended to be performance indicators, but the questions encourage planners to identify meaningful indicators for each project that will help ensure that multifaceted cultural goals are met. A rating scale is provided in the Critical Assessment Framework, not to record or demonstrate the 'objective' strength of any particular strategy, but rather to spotlight how members of the planning team may envision the impacts of a program differently. These variations in perceptions and assumptions become topics of conversation as the team continues its process of clarifying the project and its desired outcomes.

Here is an example of how the Critical Assessment Framework might be applied. If a museum project team decided to develop a project that would address the growing complexity of multicultural realities within an urban setting, they could use the Critical Assessment Framework to assess a variety of strategies. Imagine that one idea is to create an exhibit of materials that is drawn from both the museum's collection as well as from private collections within communities. A second approach is to contract several community-based arts practitioners – each linked to different ethnocultural communities – to generate projects that engage citizens and create something (e.g., public artwork, community performance, etc.) over which citizens feel ownership. In each of these scenarios, the Critical Assessment Framework can be used to examine how well:

1) curiosity, reflection, personalization, intrinsic motivation, civic responsibility are fostered amongst individuals, etc.;
2) community-based issues are identified; intra and inter-community dialogues are created; cross-generational dialogue is achieved; new partnerships are forged; etc.;
3) the museum itself builds stronger linkages to diverse community groups; understanding of emerging issues across the community is enhanced; collaborations between existing staffs are optimized; fiscal responsibility is achieved; new skill sets required by the organization is acknowledged and fulfilled; etc.;
4) critical global issues (environmental, social, cultural, economic) are woven into local community dynamics.

Each potential strategy can be discussed within the team and their potentials for impacts can be estimated, questioned, and prioritized.

For most museums, following the framework of the Critical Assessment Framework towards the goal of 'a culture of sustainability', the need will likely emerge to re-examine its core values, principal activities, assumed essential skill sets, and performance indicators. This is simply because an organization designed to function within a certain zeitgeist will not necessarily be able to shift its focus to address changing cultural needs in subsequent zeitgeists. Institutions like museums have been organized around a set of sectoral assumptions, including the importance of:

- Discipline-base, academic specializations (e.g., providing authoritative views of science, art, history, archaeology, etc.);
- Systematic 'professional' activities (e.g., collecting, preserving, documenting, etc.);
- A narrow range of public engagement strategies (e.g., exhibits, lectures, collection-based publications, etc.); and

- Corporate performance indicators, such as attendance and revenue, which do not measure *cultural* impacts.

As a result, there is great resistance, both within these organizations and within the bodies that support them (e.g., Ministries of Culture and professional training programs), to embracing the challenges of fostering a 'culture of sustainability'. This is not difficult to understand: the identity of such organizations and their professional staffs are heavily invested in the institutional status quo. It is not that existing skills are unnecessary, but that there are critical new skills that have to be cultivated in order to cultivate a 'culture of sustainability' – skills such as facilitating personal reflection, encouraging community dialogue, and motivating the public to be involved in creating a sustainable society.

The resistance to change within museums may be considered similar to that found in the world of business. Central assumptions about the purpose, function, and outcomes of many business sectors and organizations are not based on values of contributing to a sustainable society. Instead, corporations have a legal obligation to maximize profit for their shareholders. Organizations do what is necessary to maximize revenues, reduce expenses to the bare minimum, and externalize any costs that they can legally get away with (for example, not taking responsibility for the loss of local ecosystem health damaged by pollution or destroyed during the extraction of resources). If our capitalist economy is to contribute to a sustainable world, all business costs must be fully calculated and properly paid for. However, suggestions that business should become oriented to operating in a *steady-state* economy and incorporate full-cost accounting are typically viewed as an anathema to, if not an outright assault on, business itself. Similarly, cultural organizations are likely to hold tight to their traditional *modus operandi*, at least until they see that the potential rewards are higher than preserving existing corporate operations.

On the positive side, many cultural organizations are discussing the need for new forms of cultural leadership and public relevance within communities. Some of this discussion is taking the form of a burgeoning interest in the 'greening' of museums (e.g., reducing greenhouse gases, achieving energy efficiency, promoting recycling, etc.). This may be a starting point for museums, but much more is required if the cultural challenges that permeate the world are to be addressed.

Conclusion

The world is at a crossroads. Human life, as we have known it on our planet, seems unsustainable. Changes to virtually all aspects of our cultural, social, and economic systems will be required in order to put humanity onto a new, sustainable path. How can our population of almost seven billion people transform itself and strike an enduring, dynamic balance within the biosphere? Human beings have proven themselves to have remarkable ingenuity when forced into a corner. If we look widely across the world, some of the changes that are already afoot in the realms of government, business, economy, culture, cities, and individual lifestyles are inspiring. Moving forward, we will need all of the wisdom and humility that can be mustered in order to construct a viable vision of the future to which everyone can relate. Simultaneously, we will need to have adequate feedback loops that alert us to the benefits and perils of all individual and collective actions. For me, Auntie Bessie provides a good model – always moving forward, always conscious of her past, always humble in the presence of what cannot be fully known or controlled. We can take heart in the fact that, despite

the resistance to change that seems hardwired in human beings, there are also 'tipping points' which, when reached, can dissolve resistance and precipitate sea-changes capable of transforming the very rules that govern this thing called life.

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