

Developing and Revitalizing Rural Communities through Arts and Culture

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Rural/small communities are facing a time of transition. They are re-envisioning and repositioning themselves through diversifying their economic base, enhancing quality of life, and reinventing themselves for new functions and roles. Issues of retaining and engaging youth, attracting new residents and businesses, and maintaining community vitality and identity overarch these efforts. There is awareness that with many traditional resource-based industries in jeopardy, rural communities must look to develop not only new sources of wealth, but a new sense of self, and this is where arts and culture can play a key role in community sustainability. Arts, culture, and heritage are increasingly viewed not only as amenities to improve the quality of life, but as a foundation upon which the future of these rural/small communities rests. In this context, this paper presents a broad overview of key themes in the literature on cultural development in rural and small communities, based on a review of Canadian and international projects and publications. The research is diverse, incorporates a wide range of disciplines and approaches, includes both academic and policy-related studies, and points to an array of issues, dynamics, and strategies that influence the development and vitality of arts activities in rural communities. Although there is no comprehensive “whole” to the research literature, six major themes are used to broadly organize the literature: 1) The nature of arts and creative activities in rural communities; 2) Capacity and related challenges; 3) Community factors and critical ingredients; 4) Population-related issues and opportunities; 5) Economic issues and opportunities; and 6) Governance factors.

INTRODUCTION

Rural regions are in a time of transition. Challenges for rural communities in Canada and abroad include declining and aging populations, problems with youth retention, limited economic and social opportunities for residents, depleting natural resources, loss of local services, and higher costs of living. The agricultural futures of rural communities are also in question: policy and

industry changes in agriculture have added uncertainty and concern for the future of the “family farm,” with added stressors from environmental damage linked to climate change.

As rural communities re-envision and reposition themselves, they are seeking to revitalize, diversify their economic base, enhance their quality of life, and reinvent themselves for new functions and roles. A new cooperative regionalism is emerging in tandem with a growing recognition that each community should have a clear sense of self, bolstered by residents’ desire to regain a community-based self-determination (Overton). In the midst of transition, many communities are recognizing that the ways the community understands itself, celebrates itself, and expresses itself are major contributing factors to its ability to withstand economic, political, and cultural winds of change and transition. Arts, culture, and heritage are viewed not only as amenities to improve the quality of life, but as a foundation upon which the future of these rural/small communities rests. The arts and creative activities can profoundly affect the ability of a town not only to survive over time, but to thrive (Cuesta, Gillespie and Lillis).

This paper provides an overview of key themes of the “Developing and Revitalizing Rural Communities through Arts and Creativity” project, an international English-language literature review and resource compilation framed by three ideas: small/rural communities, arts, and creative activity. The project reviewed and assessed the state of research and highlighted dominant themes in the literature, both academic and policy-related research studies. The project was guided by four framing questions: What are the opportunities for and barriers to the sustainable development of creative/cultural businesses in rural regions? Are there critical ingredients or common themes necessary to build long-term vitality for the arts in rural communities? What “good practice” projects, programs, partnerships, and strategies are working in rural or remote regions? What research exists?

The project was directed by Nancy Duxbury and Heather Campbell at the Centre for Policy Studies on Culture and Communities, Simon Fraser University, with three international collaborators: Kim Dunphy, Cultural Development Network, Australia; Patrick Overton, Front Porch Institute, USA; and Lidia Varbanova, Laboratory for European Cultural Cooperation, The Netherlands, and the Centre for Intercultural and Social Development, Montréal. The project was commissioned by the Creative City Network of Canada, with financial support provided by the Department of Canadian Heritage and Rural Alberta’s Development Fund through the Alberta Recreation and Parks Association as part of the Alberta Active/Creative Communities Initiative.

The project produced four papers with accompanying project and community case studies, and an extensive annotated bibliography. Based on this collective work, this paper highlights the common themes emerging around cultural development in rural areas, and reoccurring critical ingredients to foster vibrant arts activity in rural and small communities.

DEFINITIONS

Rural

Definitions of rural vary, based on a variety of characteristics from population size, population density, distance from metropolitan centres, access to services, etc. In general, small rural communities are conceived as having populations of less than 10,000 and somewhat separate from larger centres (du Plessis and Clemenson). However, increasingly cities are invading nearby rural areas making it more and more difficult to make a clear distinction between urban and rural, and contributing to the pressures of community transition in these areas.

Arts and creative activity

The study considered arts activities in all disciplines, spanning amateur, semi-professional, and professional aspects. This encompassed both indigenously created activity as well as touring and other external influences on local activity. Creative businesses and entrepreneurial creators were also considered, mainly in the context of economic diversification, but also in reference to attracting new residents to rural communities.

COMMON THEMES

The project constituted a broad-stroke, initial mapping of the research terrain on the topic of cultural development in small/rural communities. Overall, there is no comprehensive “whole” to the research literature, which incorporates a wide range of disciplines and approaches. Also, as highlighted in the international papers (Dunphy; Overton; Varbanova), rural development (and the associated research) has different cultural contexts, local traditions, and historical developments that inform and flavour cultural development policy structures and strategies in play in each region.

While the extent of cultural/creative work occurring in rural communities tends to be undercounted, under-recognized, and often undervalued, this may be gradually changing. Two major perspectives are evident in academic research and policy-related studies: community cultural development (emphasizing social roles) and economic development (from the economic impacts of festivals to attracting and fostering creative businesses). The growing recognition of artists, creators, and entrepreneurial creative businesses as potential residents and businesses in rural areas seeking to diversify their economic base offers a widening opportunity to re-think the contributions of arts and creative activities to these communities.

The major themes in the literature reviewed can be organized into six categories:

1. The nature of arts and creative activities in rural communities
2. Capacity and related challenges
3. Community factors and critical ingredients
4. Population-related issues and opportunities
5. Economic issues and opportunities
6. Governance factors

THE NATURE OF ARTS AND CREATIVE ACTIVITIES IN RURAL COMMUNITIES

The nature of arts activity in rural communities is influenced by the interaction or tension between cultural heritage, contemporary art, and collective memory (Varbanova). Literature about arts activities in rural communities tends to focus on three topics: the nature of arts activities occurring indigenously within the communities (“rural arts”), festivals, and the impacts of touring activities.

Rural arts activities are described as holistic, drawing in people from many walks of life, and associated with individual and collective capacity building, empowerment, collaboration, expanded networking opportunities, and transformation (Brotman; Gard Ewell). Rural arts or

participatory arts are seen as a means of inspiring and activating community self-determination (Brotman) and have been described as “the glue which holds rural communities together” (Voluntary Arts Network 2). Complementary to this, “art as process and citizen as participant” is emphasized over “art as product and citizen as patron” in these activities (Overton).

Maintaining a balance between local activity and outside influences is also important, nourishing local creators and ideas and providing a wider range of cultural opportunities in communities (Brotman; Matarasso et al.; Nolte). Touring activities in rural communities are associated with community development, and community-driven projects and organizations (Matarasso et al.). The literature emphasizes the importance of local involvement and control over “imported activities,” and the capacity building potential of grassroots-based regional networks (O’Leary; Regional Arts Australia).

Festivals encompass a variety of cultural practices and activities. They are events in which community identities are reproduced and maintained, and can serve as a means of fostering collective identity and a sense of belonging (Gibson and Walmsley; Gorman-Murray, Waitt and Gibson). Over time, they can characterize and enhance a broadly defined cultural expression of place. Although both the community-building and economic benefits of festivals have become increasingly recognized in many rural communities (Davies; Gorman-Murray, Waitt and Gibson), a disconnect or “policy invisibility” within community planning contexts is also observed (Gibson and Walmsley).

The broader context for these cultural activities is the availability and capabilities of broadband internet, which is particularly highlighted by rural communities’ growing desire to attract the “creative class” as residents-with-businesses; growing cultural sharing practices, especially among youth; and the centrality of the internet as a marketing tool (Duxbury and Campbell). The need for connection – to others, to markets, to sources of inspiration and trends, to broadcast oneself outward – is a reoccurring theme.

CAPACITY AND RELATED CHALLENGES

Arts activity in rural communities is challenged by a number of factors. Overall, community resources, both monetary and human, are limited, and are faced with pressures of survival, transition, and a changing population. Within the community, the arts may not have a prominent status or widespread appreciation, and rural practitioners may also feel they are overlooked by city-centric funding approaches and gatekeepers. Thus, organizations typically operate with limited capacity and resources, and face multiple challenges on volunteerism, the core of community-based arts and cultural organizations. In general, the number of volunteers contributing in rural/small communities is declining, while the average age of those who are volunteering is increasing. In addition, volunteers are often expected to complete tasks that are beyond their expertise and demand excessive time commitments, which adds further pressure on residents’ willingness to volunteer their time and skills (Overton; Brooks-Joiner and McKay). Opportunities for capacity building and skills development are also limited.

COMMUNITY FACTORS AND CRITICAL INGREDIENTS

The continuum of creative development within communities has been traced in several studies, with the goal of developing a resource or tool specific to small, rural communities and culture-led regeneration. Key ingredients identified by Shifferd and Rodning Bash outlined a progression of artistic development from emerging to sustaining to mature, a continuum “from nascent, isolated and episodic, to highly integrated and sustained, involving significant numbers of people” (Shifferd 8). Reoccurring ingredients that fostered the arts and creative development in small and rural communities, identified in this research, included:

1. An underlying appreciation and attitude of acceptance toward local culture, history, people and assets, and a community’s “sense of place”;
2. A valuing of the arts in everyday life, and an inclusive encouragement of broad-based participation;
3. Key leadership roles representing the broad community, and a community-based coalition willing to work towards a common goal;
4. Social networks of key volunteers and arts supporters who work on exhibitions, festivals, community cultural development projects; support artists in their community-regeneration efforts; and inclusively encourage vibrancy among all cultural groups in a community; and
5. Cultural infrastructure development – Cultural facilities and centres are important “gathering places,” functioning as a cornerstone of community cohesion and community building. Support for this infrastructure, either as part of new developments or as maintenance of existing facilities, is essential to create a visible focus of efforts and to offer a physical point of contact for diverse community groups.

POPULATION-RELATED ISSUES AND OPPORTUNITIES

Population retention and attraction is a prevailing concern of small/rural communities, often tightly coupled with economic diversification exigencies. Three population groups were highlighted in the literature reviewed: youth, artists and creative entrepreneurs, and urban-to-rural migrants.

Youth engagement and retention, as part of revitalization efforts, is addressed widely with few sure answers and many as-yet-unevaluated efforts and strategies. Traditional methods of including youth engagement in arts programming typically provide cultural and creative recreational opportunities for local youth, as something separate from providing career or entrepreneurial opportunities. As recreationally focused activities, cultural engagement has been positioned to encourage social development and inclusion, develop leadership skills and volunteering experience, or build community ties through heritage and history explorations (e.g., Canadian Rural Partnership; Nicholls).

While these social and community-focused aspects of meaningful cultural engagement are still very important, emerging recommendations and initiatives indicate that these traditional views on the contributions of arts activities are diversifying to include the development of cultural/creative employment and enterprises (Burns and Kirkpatrick; Donald; Gibson “Youthful creativity”). The role of youth is increasingly coupled with ideas of the “creative economy” and the possibility of increased jobs in these industries. Population retention efforts include skill-building programs to support a workforce capable of attracting these industries and

conversely allowing youth to remain in their own community in lieu of moving for either education or employment reasons. Research studies of youth out-migration, however, remain disconnected from research on the growth of creative industries in regional areas (Gibson and Argent). Population retention strategies could benefit from this connection.

With a growing economic emphasis on entrepreneurship and small businesses, a desire to attract the “creative class” to rural communities is also observed. Artists move to smaller communities and rural areas as they flee the high rents of urban centres and seek a rural/small community “quality of life” (Baeker; Burns and Kirkpatrick). Other factors that attract artists in significant numbers to Canadian towns and villages include: access to urban markets, local sources of employment (e.g., part-time jobs), agglomeration economies enabled by a local organizational catalyst (e.g., a university) or the overall size of the community-region, an appealing landscape, and the existence of in situ aboriginal artistic concentrations (Bunting and Mitchell; see also Hracs; Mitchell, Bunting and Piccioni). Broadband internet access is a key enabler of an urban-to-rural move (Bowles; Burns and Kirkpatrick; Donald).

Artists and creative entrepreneurs located in rural areas tend to be older and have established businesses and markets (Hracs; McGranahan and Wojan; Wojan, Lambert and McGranahan). They often take leadership roles in community initiatives (Cuesta, Gillespie and Lillis; Jones).

Urban-to-rural migrations (counter-urbanism) also play out on a broader societal basis, as a relatively wealthy middle-class group withdraws from urban settings to pursue a different lifestyle in a rural location, fueled by rising urban housing costs, quality of life concerns, and life transitions such as starting families or retirement (McManus and Connell). This trend underlies community reinventions as well as processes of rural gentrification, and the dynamic impacts of these relocations continue to evolve over time (Gibson “Creative economy”). Often, these migrants expect and may arrange for the amenities and services they are accustomed to having in urban settings (Gibson “Creative economy”). In some cases, urban workers relocate their residences in rural/small towns within commuting distance to larger urban centres while continuing to work in the city. This situation raises questions as to the degree to which these residents are truly engaged in the life and issues of these communities (Overton). The overarching issue for communities is how to change, move forward, be open to, and maximize the opportunities made possible through the transition influences, while finding ways to retain the essence of who they are as a community.

ECONOMIC ISSUES AND OPPORTUNITIES

In numerous reports, the arts and creative industries are positioned as strategic economic sectors in rural communities, as significant contributors to regional and rural economies, as stimulants to broader economic revitalization, and as tourism-based opportunities. Attention to arts and creative activity has been bolstered recently in two ways: growing markets in cultural and rural tourism (Follett; Jones; Voluntary Arts Network; NGA Centre for Best Practices) and rising attention to entrepreneurial, creative enterprises in the context of economic diversification (Gibson “Creative economy”; Henkel; Hracs; Hunter; Labrianidis; Marcusen; New Media Partners and Culture Finance North West).

Cultural tourism, anchored by heritage or special events and festivals, can become an economic mainstay for a rural community. The importance of obtaining a balance between tourism and the overall needs of the local community is strongly emphasized in the research

literature (Gibson and Davidson; Richards). While some cultural tourism trajectories emerge as an organic formalization of plans and initiatives from the community, other initiatives appear to be more top-down. In both cases, there are strong warnings concerning the overdominance of tourism imperatives in community decisions and plans, as well as the potential threat of over-commercialization or over-commodification in the service of cultural tourism – perhaps fueled by rural gentrification (Kebir and Crevoisier; Mitchell; Mitchell and de Waal; Mitchell and Coghill). This “creative destruction” may change a community so that it loses part of the charm that made it interesting and unique in the first place.

Some researchers warn of the potential of introducing inappropriate frameworks to rural-based cultural initiatives, and question the idea of transferring “urban-centric” creative economy policies and practices to rural locations (Gibson and Klocker; McCool and Moisey). Cautions in exclusively using an economic development frame for cultural development are also evident – some worthy and important arts activities do not “fit” within an economic development frame (Gibson and Klocker; Luckman, Gibson and Lea).

Overall, the interconnected world of creative production is more complicated than the image of a simple “city–country divide” and should focus on networks and flows of people, information, and creative production (Gibson; Burns and Kirkpatrick). Inter-regional networks can support creative producers to lever opportunities, to seek wider markets, and to open up access in key industries (Gibson “Creative economy”). Inter-community rural networks focusing on arts and culture offer a systematic and synergetic approach to revitalization efforts and overcoming isolation and distance (Varbanova). In these contexts, the role of incubators and nodes for scattered networks of cultural producers is vital, allowing for finer-grained, intensely networked creative communities.

GOVERNANCE FACTORS

Governance strategies for arts and culture in a rural context are situated within broader arts and cultural policies (e.g., Regional Arts Australia) as well as rural strategic policy initiatives and/or agricultural policy (e.g. Hunter). A key concern found across the studies is the applicability of urban approaches to rural settings considering the unique challenges specific to location.

Numerous studies include recommendations for governance of cultural development in rural communities, with six dominant reoccurring categories:

1. Community buy-in and integration, including the necessity of government commitment at all levels;
2. Engaging youth, with a focus on capacity and retention through employment, recreational, and educational initiatives;
3. Leadership development, with the goal of developing roles of energizer, broker, coach, and champion to initiate local entrepreneurship and investment;
4. Increased funding support with the goals of achieving sustainable, whole-community development and a reduction of bureaucratic obstacles and an increase in community-driven and controlled funding initiatives;
5. Education and partnerships, related to building whole-community solutions with partnerships between non-profit and for-profit organizations, and the necessity of training, engaging, and maintaining volunteer bases; and

6. The need for policy implementation and further study with the support of government and other funding bodies.

The question of “right timing” is also an important aspect of discussions of governance as often there needs to be an accurate reading of a community’s resources, capacity, and assets before a plan of revitalization can be fully acted upon. The role of governance in this situation must be community driven to preserve a bottom-up, sustainable program of culture-led regeneration. Regional art officers and networks of support may be key to these efforts.

IN CLOSING

Issues related to the changing nature of rural communities are articulated within numerous conferences, forums, and publications featuring discussions on rural regeneration, social enterprise, and community capacity building (Smiles). Although cultural considerations are still marginalized in many of these discussions, there appears to be a rising tide of attention to the community benefits of vibrant cultural expression and community identity. As rural and small communities adjust to dynamically changing situations, and position (or re-position) themselves for the future, cultural activities and creative enterprises are increasingly considered as an important element in the sustainability of the community as well as a key in its transition.

Some writers argue that fostering arts and cultural programs will help stem the “tide of youth out-migration and declining quality of life” in rural areas (Brotman; Nicholls). Creative economy opportunities have been added to traditional social/community development views of the role of the arts in a community and to ideas to engage and retain youth. The entrepreneurial basis of economic development is gaining growing attention, with creative/artistic entrepreneurs as a component of these enterprises. Demographic patterns are also a factor, as creative individuals with established companies look to relocate away from crowded, expensive cities to smaller communities offering basic necessities and good quality of life.

Research in this area is diverse and leads in a wide variety of directions, pointing to an array of issues, dynamics, and strategies that influence the development and vitality of arts activities in rural communities. The project compiled and highlighted the leading themes and paths in this literature to inform and inspire further research as well as application in practice. This paper aimed to provide an overview of the main discussions and ideas currently active. Further details and additional conceptual paths of ideas and discourses are set out in the full papers. The project revealed a range of useful conceptual models and case studies available to inform and guide community strategies and actions, but additional conceptual and applied research is still needed in many areas to address new realities; to identify, think about, and act on evolving issues and opportunities; and to bring forward traditions while forging new ones.

Arts and cultural activities are not the answer to all the issues of rural communities – there are no simple solutions to addressing the complex situation of sustaining rural communities into the future – but culture can play important roles in the process of community adaptation, development and, sometimes, reinvention.

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