

LUMINATO FESTIVAL: TORONTO'S ANSWER TO THE CRISIS OF SPACE AND PLACE FOR CITIZENS

By Michele Anderson

Dragan Klaic, a leading researcher on festivals in Europe, believes the new emerging purpose of festivals is that they

increasingly... are not just artistic packages with appealing and valued content but instruments to re-examine the urban dynamics, ... within the city space....

[F]estivals challenge the habitual pathways and perceptions.... In the urban space, functionally dominated by housing and consumerism, festivals reaffirm the public sphere in its civic dimension, including polemic, debate, critique and collective passion for a certain art form or topic.... [F]estivals appear as a precious force to mark the perimeters of the public sphere, upgrade it by the concentration of creative gestures and their collective appreciation. (202-203)

Klaic captures a theme of central importance, one that has been debated already within the context of broadcast media, the Internet and newspaper industry, but that still has yet to be thoroughly explored by theorists within the context of the cultural sphere of festivals: the public sphere. Specifically, because of the nature of festivals as a spatio-temporal event within the physical space of the city, and because political, socio-economic as well as artistic-cultural spaces intersect the festival event, festivals are unique points of convergence in the context of the public sphere.

If, according to Habermas, the role of the public sphere is indeed to act as “the

central place for agreements to be reached discursively”¹ (Payne 233), then how do we negotiate the public sphere in terms of the cultural realm of festivals, and how does the embodiment of that cultural space become negotiated beyond the discursive into praxis? We can assume that the creative-cultural public sphere also requires a rigorous and open space for discursive negotiation, free from force or coercion (Sassoon 39-43; Croteau and Hoynes 22-26). Again, drawing from Habermas, we can also assume that Toronto’s creative-cultural public sphere is only one of many public spheres, in which various citizens can become engaged, while engaging in various other spheres simultaneously or interdependently. Thus, by looking at the *lexical* aspect of festivals, we can start to determine whether the festival environment is discursively open and un-coerced, and thereby ripe for an equally open public *praxis* of what I will refer to as the *creative-cultural public sphere*: the sphere of activities directly aligned with cultural and artistic creation, production and discourse.

The Creative City

In response to the City of Toronto’s *Culture Plan for the Creative City* findings that Torontonians require not simply jobs, but a quality of life incorporating creative-cultural participation, Luminato was launched in 2008 as part of the Creative City initiative, a trend in municipal management that marries job creation and improved quality of life through a greater focus on creative and culture industries,

¹ Taken from the *Dictionary of Cultural and Critical Theory*’s definition of the Habermasian public sphere in his *Structural Transformation of the public Sphere: An Inquiry into the Category of Bourgeois Society*. 1962 (1989)

activities and policies² (Florida 2002, 2008; Martin and Florida 2009; City of Toronto 2003; Liberal Party of Ontario 2003, 2008). But how does Luminato assist in marrying the two sides of the equation? To help answer this question I looked at how the role of the creative-cultural sphere is being positioned policy-wise within Toronto's *Culture Plan* to fulfill the aspect of its mandate to increase public involvement and access to the artistic and cultural life of Toronto. I then contrasted this positioning with that of the Luminato Festival, using discursive evidence from Luminato's 2008 Regent Park activities.

Spatio-temporal resolution

The studies used to inform the City of Toronto's *Culture Plan* from the initial *Workprint* published in 2001 and *Culture Plan* in 2003, to the various papers and books and studies produced up to 2009, are all based on the idea of the "creative city".³ The creative city's resolution to the problems of creating both jobs and a rich cultural life for citizens is to merge the two together. This is what Harvey calls a "spatio-temporal" resolution to economics (202-239). Thus, an increase of creative jobs, in jobs within the creative industries, and in public access to the creative and cultural arts is supposed to satisfy what the City of Toronto identified as the two

² See also Luminato website: <http://www.luminato.com/2009/thecreativecity>, discussions of the creative city in Toronto and Ontario cultural plans, as well as Florida's own contributions to Toronto's cultural "renaissance" through the Martin Prosperity Institute at the University of Toronto.

³ See the City of Toronto's *The Creative City: A Workprint* (2001) and *Culture Plan for the Creative City* (2003); Roger Martin and Richard Florida's *Ontario in the Creative Age* (2009); Florida's *Who's Your City* (2008) and *Rise of the Creative Class* (2002); Toronto Community Foundation Report "Toronto's Vital Signs (200)8"; *Imagine a Toronto: Strategies for Creative Cities Project*, (eds.) Gertler, Meric S., et al. (2006); ; "Creativity, Culture and Innovation in the Knowledge-based Economy: Opportunities and Challenges for Ontario" by Tara Vinodrai, and Meric S. Gertler (2006); see also AuthenticCity's report for the City of Toronto, *Creative City Planning Framework: A Supporting Document to the Agenda for Prosperity: Prospectus for a Great City* (2008).

biggest issues facing Toronto in 2001: jobs and culture. (2001: 1-11)

Habitus of Place

Habitus (a concept Pierre Bourdieu championed), according to Leonie Sandercock, is a “field of social relations structurally” which has a “spatial component, the spaces of city, as well as the social spaces in which one feels ‘at home’, where we experience both a positive sense of belonging, as well as a sense of knowing where we belong, in the social order which is also the ordering of the city” (222). Her definition places a *habitus* of place specifically in the context of the city space. A further relationship I want to explore between *habitus* and *belonging* to the city space is the function of reaffirming identity (be it individual, or group), and a sense of being *at home* in Toronto for those who participate in the festivals through creative-cultural engagement. This is especially pertinent for citizens who normally feel disenfranchised, like youth, immigrants, minority ethnic groups, the elderly and the poor.

This particular sense of *habitus of place* is achieved by the public’s active participation in the cultural-artistic life of Toronto by putting their “stamp” on the city, not unlike the way we people personalize homes, offices and schools with a personal touch. In doing so, people create the sense of belonging to the space, and simultaneously appropriate the space so it belongs to them in a larger spatial version of being “at home,” as Sandercock puts it. This is one aspect of the cultural-creative public sphere among many, but it is nonetheless an important part, according to Sandercock and her colleagues in *Habitus*, in empowering publics and opening up

public spheres to public participants, in essence to create *their* Toronto. In order to create this space, however, people need to be the agents of the activity and creativity that results. Thus, in the case of the festival, belonging would only be achieved by significant control over and participation in the festival activities themselves.

The Toronto *Creative City Workprint* (2001) and *Culture Plan* (2003)

The *equation* of the culture plan, however, is most concerned with a marrying of cultural community and economy; in essence, equating quality of life quite clearly with working life, and equating cultural diversity with a commodity in the marketplace. It is a concept some refer to as “creative economy” (Borup), while its manifestation in actual policy, infrastructure and jobs in Toronto is called the “Creative City” (Scott; Gertler et. al). The equation focuses on the partnership between private or corporate interests and the city in order to fulfill this dynamic, rather than on public participation. My analysis of the policy discourse showed that the language of partnership with private interests, which starts in the *Workprint* and carries over to the *Culture Plan*, is the primary focus. Though the *Culture Plan*’s aim is to increase participation in cultural events by residents in all parts of the city (intro), the role of private financing for those stated goals trumps the concern for quality participation in the context of a “cash-poor” city culture plan. As a result, issues of belonging, a key factor in encouraging public engagement by all members of Toronto’s public, are emphasized more in discourse than in practice.

The City’s Culture Division stated that it intended on working with community organizations across the city to create public art projects that celebrate Toronto’s rich

diversity of cultural life; providing a range of accessible cultural programs and opportunities; establishing a community cultural reference group that includes youth, seniors, First Nations and diverse communities, and other initiatives too numerous to mention. (*Workprint*, 2001; *Culture Plan*, 2003) In turn, these organizations and the public they serve were to find greater participation in the city's cultural activities, such as the Luminato Festival.

Luminato

The 2008 Luminato festival incorporated a combination of government grants, corporate sponsorship, and public-private partnerships in order to provide both ticketed and free events to as wide an audience as possible. The three programming pillars of Luminato, “collaboration, diversity, and accessibility”, reflect the *Culture Plan* principles and drove Luminato's commitment to host free public events for the greatest numbers and diversity of people in the city. [Luminato: http://www.Festival_Wrap-up_Press_Release_June_16_2008.pdf] Thus, Luminato's events should provide the best evidence of their fulfillment of these principles.

Luminato's Regent Park Activities 2008

The *StreetScape* program in Regent Park consisted of eight weeks of events leading up to and including the Luminato Festival week. Luminato's description of the Streetscape artists, does evokes their values of accessibility and diversity in the context Dragan Klaic describes for a healthy public sphere. The use of descriptive terms like boundary-“pushing” and “cutting-edge”, as well as the title “street” artist, discursively

align these activities with values described by Klaic as demarcating the public sphere through *debate*.⁴ The description also references the pushing of boundaries outside of the elite forums and into the streets in terms like “for the people” and “Legal Graffiti”. Aspects of artist volunteerism are emphasized through not only this event but also continued community engagement and education. Another section highlights the public benefit of the events and attempts to reflect the local community within the common space of their community, Regent Park, as well as the desire to “confer importance” on the “residents as individuals” and to “celebrate their community life” (Luminato: http://www.Luminato_StreetScape_Program_Release_May_14_2008.pdf).

These examples seem to satisfy Klaic’s definition of “reaffirming the public sphere in its civic dimension”, however, this is done less by “polemic, debate, or critique for a certain art form or topic” than by curatorial selection. Public engagement here does not necessarily precipitate public debate. However, this description satisfies another part of Klaic’s definition because the artists’ actions “upgrade it [the art form] by the concentration of creative gestures and their collective appreciation”. Also, according to the Luminato description there is a sense of “community appreciation and respect” *conferred* on the Regent Park groups and not *created* by them. The use of the term “confer” is particularly problematic in the sense that appreciation for the community’s artworks and culture should not be conferred by an outside party, but created through the empowerment of the participants.

Further, it is important to keep in mind that Luminato’s description is not synonymous with the participants’ experiences, but rather with the discourse they are

⁴ This type of artistic resistance is evident in the work of many of the Regent Park artists chosen for the 2008 Luminato list.

trying to project: of an engaged, dynamic, open public discourse not imposed or coerced by the cultural elite, or by Luminato Festival administrators. Luminato's focus on "hands-on" participation is often emphasized in their descriptions of Regent Park activities⁵ and links to community projects and partnerships. The choice of local artists, as well as the focus on current art that matters to youth, such as hip-hop and rap-inspired works, help to make the art relevant to participants.^{6 7} Likewise the *Urban Beautification* project consisted of workshops for youth that involved many community-focused local groups like *Seventh Generation Image Makers* for aboriginal youth, *Them.ca* (urban artists) and *Style in Progress* (hip-hop festival). (Luminato: Urban Beautification Websites) In sum, we can see a concern for engaged participation, sense of belonging, and agency in the Luminato descriptions of Regent Park events.

The Regent Park projects are the strongest example in the 2008 list of events where attempts at local citizen participation in creativity and cultural expression were incorporated in Luminato. Out of Luminato's descriptions of over two hundred events, these few stood out in satisfying some, though not all – and at times only partially – of Klaic's requirements for a public cultural-creative sphere, for citizen engagement, active participation and challenge to the *status quo*. However, Luminato's awareness of these issues is but a fraction of the equation. More extensive public engagement and feedback would be required to supply more accurate means of measuring community satisfaction with festival participation. Of great significance is the lack of Regent Park community

⁶ Both the *Projection Portraits* and *Art Posters* projects involved the use of local artists and large-scale visuals from the hip-hop and rap scenes, in an effort to reach local youth's tastes. (George-Cosh, David)

⁷ Che Kothari, who produced *Projection Portraits* with Ryan Patterson of Hightop Studio, is a Toronto native, and in the *Art Posters* project, youth interns were able to shadow Dan Bergeron, also a Toronto native, whose work transgresses corporate media norms and thus also addresses Klaic's definition of debate and testing of margins in the public sphere. (BlogTO and Fauxreel)

member involvement in the curatorial, organizational, funding, marketing and planning aspects of the festival. This absence puts into stark relief the discursive aims and the practical achievements of Luminato in challenging the *status quo*. To date, no discernible leading curatorial role seems to have been created to incorporate Regent Park participants into the decision-making or creative roles of future Luminato Festivals.

Conclusion

These conflicts notwithstanding, the 2008 Regent Park activities pushed the boundaries of public engagement in a way that warrants further investigation into the possible role that Luminato could ostensibly play in the future creative-cultural public sphere in Toronto. If one extends the logic of *habitus of place* to include the argument of this paper, then one could envision creative-cultural participation as capable of re-articulating space in the city within a notion of increased belonging to that space and *vice versa*. However, that participation cannot be limited to spectatorship, but must incorporate participation in all levels of festival funding, creation, innovation and production. At a time when the *economic* side of creativity is being promoted in the Creative City equation, we must be extra vigilant to protect the public sphere and ensure its growth.

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