



Lord

Have Mercy

Building a shrine to human rights or revitalizing a city's cultural footprint?

Better call **Barry Lord & Gail Dexter Lord.**

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Cultural capital is a concept that was first articulated four decades ago by the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu to explain how people benefited from direct access to stimulating ideas.

The key to making them come alive often involves the development of galleries, museums, and other facilities

that contribute to the fabric of the places they exist. And today, even as an infinite amount of information can be digitally accessed anywhere in the world, the demand is on the rise for cultural capital to define a geographical area.

But then, none of these structures can just sprout up from the ground.

Consider the planning challenges in creating cultural capital—like figuring out the kind of stories that can be told through exhibits, how visitors will be motivated to move through the turnstiles, and how the setting can be enhanced through a revenue-generating restaurant or gift shop.

Whatever the environment being

created—from a weekend afternoon festival to a structure designed to last for centuries—the efforts hinge on being able to define the meaning of a place.

Much of this thought process currently originates on a quiet stretch of Yonge Street in midtown Toronto, where a modest seven-story office

building houses the global headquarters of Lord Cultural Resources.

The business that married couple Barry and Gail Dexter Lord launched in 1981 essentially takes the opposite approach of a global brand like Starbucks. Rather than repeating the same template more than 1,900 times, their work on six continents



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has focused on drawing out the distinctive elements of an assignment.

Recently, that has included a commission in their 50th country to date, the Liberation War Museum in Bangladesh. Last year, the couple struck a deal to consult the Chinese Museums Association. And, in between, the experience of the firm was reflected in a museum exclusively dedicated to the history of Niagara Falls.

From their respective early careers as big thinkers about art—Gail was a critic for the *Toronto Star* while Barry ran *artscanada* magazine prior to moving through the ranks of the federal museums system in Ottawa—the Lords started their own venture upon recognizing that there were limits to what government agencies could competently achieve in the face of ever-shifting priorities.

Yet it's not like there was a book available to explain how a successful museum gets made, which is why they set out to write one themselves. Global demand for the collective wisdom of their staff has continued ever since.

Maintaining a successful practice for over 30 years has also required staying on top of how things change. Art is something we increasingly interface with outside of gallery

walls. Museums have gone beyond solely displaying artifacts from the past to incorporate all sorts of modern multimedia.

Moreover, rather than being confined to specific buildings, there is growing expectation that building cultural capital is key to rebooting an economy.

So, it is appropriate that one of the highest-profile assignments Lord has taken on to date involves the city that spawned the current president of the United States.

The Chicago Cultural Plan, a concept initially developed in 1986, was a priority for revival by Rahm Emanuel when he left his

role as Barack Obama's White House chief of staff to run for mayor. Residents of the city have been asked to provide their thoughts on how a refreshed creative agenda can increase tourism dollars and civic pride—along with providing incentive for more artists to stick around for the long run.

Lord secured this opportunity in the way it has many others: successfully responding to a publicly posted RFP (request for proposal) from local officials in pursuit of the right people who can help see such a vision through.

“The only way to do any good is to bring genuine

engagement and participation to people,” explains Gail. “We've usually been part of planning that involves buildings and projects—the Chicago plan has been more of an experience in policies and processes.”

A series of 30 public meetings initiated the discussion of how Chicago could raise its cultural quotient by 2030. Those ideas were then summed up in a draft that was published online—and downloaded more than 11,000 times—in conjunction with Town Hall meetings in which reactions were electronically registered.

The process shed light on a desire for an increase



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TOP: Mexican Art Museum town hall meeting.

BOTTOM: Town hall meeting in Chicago.



ideas subject to so much public scrutiny—that’s why we do what we do.”

Of course, new buildings also continue to be built, including the first national museum to be established in Canada since 1967: the Canadian Museum of Human Rights in Winnipeg.

Planting such a structure outside of Ottawa was ambitious enough when the late media mogul Izzy Asper started to develop this idea. But he was motivated upon discovering that the firm with the best reputation for understanding museums was based in Canada, too. The project was formally launched just before his death in 2003.

When it ultimately came time to contemplate what its contents would be, Lord Cultural Resources followed through on visiting 19 cities to learn from Canadians who had stories to share, along with their ideas for what was worth focusing on in the complex.

in the number of lifelong learning programs, the development of more artistic work spaces, and illuminating creative talent in varied neighborhoods through measures as basic as beautifying manhole covers.

While a number of Chicagoans were initially suspicious about the consultation process, the Lords were pleasantly surprised that the reaction was overwhelmingly positive, which has set a precedent for other cities seeking to transcend cynicism.

“This plan is not about building another building,” says Gail. “This is about harnessing the creativity that is already there. And it’s been exciting to have

The museum, which is expected to open by 2015, will highlight the Holocaust alongside many other atrocities—and the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which Canada played a central role in drafting.

While speculation about the slant taken on these infamous historical chapters generated controversy, the Lords are confident that their consultations will contribute to a positive inspiration, particularly the emphasis on how their own country has been at the forefront.

“The exhibits will emphasize Canada’s story—warts and all,” promises Gail. “That includes taking a critical stance on how Aborigines have been treated over time. But this will ultimately be a positive reflection of the fact that we are now living in the human rights era.”

Meanwhile, another museum under construction with Lord input can be found in the East Indian state Bihar. Religious and scholarly figures who lived in the area, including the Buddha, will find their legacies reflected throughout a 13-acre site in the capital of Patna.

“The goal is not only to give the Biharis pride in who they are,” explains Barry, “but also to provide inspiration for what they

can be again.”

Participation in projects that can boost the fortunes and improve the self-image of an area has become familiar turf. The bleak industrial suburbs of Manchester, England, were transformed when it was learned that a set of paintings by L. S. Lowry—inspired by the area itself—lacked an adequate exhibition space. A sprawling urban environment subsequently took shape around the complex called the Lowry.

These undertakings have a common denominator: turn the ideas that have defined a community into physical space that will stimulate the surroundings. The philosophy has been implemented a couple of thousand times so far—but the planet has many more places that are just beginning to recognize how their fortunes would be enhanced by stories that can be relayed through a public gathering place, rather than just via pixels on a personal screen.

And the ways in which these past creative expressions are presented can provide inspiration for where things will head next.

“Cultural change is coming whether you like it or not,” says Barry. “We have come to realize that is the business we are in.” **LM**