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ART INFRASTRUCTURE

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Nuit Blanche | Jamelie Hassan
Younger than Jesus | Mika Rottenberg
Call to Order | Fire Watcher
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BEYOND *the* HYPE: NUIT BLANCHE *in the* “CREATIVE CITY”

by Joseph Banh



The “Creative City” has become a common byword in today’s increasingly globalized world. Metropolitan centres the world over are mobilizing their cultural resources in a bid to brand themselves as global “cultural” cities, with hopes that this strategy will have a positive impact on the local economy and strengthen peoples sense of place and civic identity. During the headlong rush to position culture as a resource in urban regeneration, there has been an unprecedented focus on cities as sites of intense cultural activity in the belief that the attendant creative quotient will translate into economic benefits. Yet the focus on culture, as mobilized through urban cultural policy, also has important implications for the public realm and urban citizenship. This fervent attention to culture offers avenues of possibility for the civic-minded since the articulation of culture is never a finished project nor is it a closed system. Instead, it is a constantly contested realm, which makes it an ideal staging ground for speaking about the people, spaces, and institutions that constitute a city.

While each city is unique, strategies for culture-led urban regeneration have some notably similar characteristics, typically ones involving heavy investment in cultural infrastructure along with the creation of a myriad of festivals as place-making tactics. According to Guy Julier, the revaluation of the built environment through investment in the physical infrastructure of the urban milieu can be understood as a “hard-branding” strategy

for city place-marketing, while the widespread “festivalization” of cities suggests a “soft-branding” tactic that is characterized by “a looser system” with a “broader palette of options” used to present “the more nuanced aspects of [a city’s] aesthetic dimension.”¹ Toronto’s current cultural renaissance reflects both hard-branding and soft-branding as the city’s flagship cultural institutions are being made over and urban spaces are transformed throughout the year by various festivals and their attendant publics.

One of the most well-attended urban festivals is Toronto’s Nuit Blanche, the annual 12-hour, dusk-to-dawn celebration of contemporary art that boasts an estimated attendance ranging from 425,000 in its inaugural year of 2006; to 800,000 in 2007; and approaching 1,000,000 in 2008. Nuit Blanche is an interesting phenomenon because it is a perfect example of how an urban festival can be used to place-brand the Creative City, while also enriching and strengthening the city’s public realm. As a unique event staged in public space, the festival creates a site where the dominant narratives of Toronto’s Creative City can be enacted and performed, but also where such ideologies can be unframed by socially minded artists and curators. Nuit Blanche makes available space for the re-framing of public discourse around issues not currently in the public consciousness. Rather than operating as merely a place-branding strategy, it also functions as a highly visible mode of public address that can be catalytic in engaging urban citizens to conceive of their city as a shared task and to participate actively in the evolution of the Creative City.

1 Guy Julier, “Urban Designscapes and the Production of Aesthetic Consent,” *Urban Studies* 42(5) (2005): 869-887, 873.

Yoko Ono, *Wish Tree and Imagine Peace*, Nuit Blanche, 2009, Toronto
PHOTO: COURTESY OF CITY OF TORONTO

According to Charles Landry and Franco Bianchini, the Creative City idea was formulated as an urban response to the structural changes wrought by neoliberal economic globalization. It was broad in scope and aimed to foreground “the importance of creative responses to urban problems, be they in traffic management, business development, greening the city, integrating ethnic communities, regenerating run-down housing estates or enlivening city centres.”² To them, the concept represented a new epistemology of the city and was meant to stimulate new modes of thought and knowledge on coping with the difficulties of contemporary urban living. In 2003, Toronto implemented a *Culture Plan for the Creative City: City of Toronto* to strategically mobilize its cultural resources and aid in its own Creative City renaissance.

This plan, however, has not been without controversy. Much of the criticism is centred around its foregrounding of the importance of Richard Florida’s “creative class” as a fundamental reason for mobilizing Toronto’s cultural resources as an economic expedient.³ Put bluntly, the plan assessed the city’s existing cultural resources and argued for greater investment in cultural and heritage amenities in order to attract members of the creative class as a key component of future prosperity. Explicitly referencing Florida’s *Rise of the Creative Class* (2002), the executive summary states:

The Culture Plan recognizes that great cities of the world are all Creative Cities whose citizens work with ideas, are intensely mobile and insist on a high quality of life wherever they choose to live. Such cities, and their citizens, have an overwhelming impact on the economies of their countries and compete with one another directly for trade, for investment and, most of all, for talent.⁴

The Culture Plan consistently reiterates a valorization of members of the creative class as the ideal citizens of Toronto. But while it points to the importance of attracting and retaining the “best and brightest” through strategic uses of culture, and the creation of various amenities to accommodate their diverse lifestyles, there are other sections of the population the plan ignores altogether. These individuals, who are not “intensely mobile,” and who would likely settle for simply a decent and dignified quality of life, include many immigrants and members of the increasingly marginalized working class, who often have low-paying service industry jobs, as well as the poor and the homeless. While it is true that Toronto’s civic culture has evolved over the years as a result of im-

migration—which has created a very diverse public culture—diversity is not necessarily a de facto indicator of a healthy public sphere. In fact, the reality is that a multicultural city, with so many different perspectives and histories, requires a strong and, above all, inclusive public realm in order to translate and negotiate between the particular worldviews of the multitudes—especially those individuals not officially accounted for yet demanding to be heard—so that they may also coalesce with the larger project of the evolving city.

Yet what are the implications for the social life of the city when the Creative City framework is oriented primarily around economic factors and potentially disenfranchises those residents who do not fall within that framework? This question is an especially urgent one for Toronto as the narrative of its cultural transformation continues to unfold. As cultural theorist Malcolm Miles notes, “[w]ithin the wider question of what constitutes a city and for whose well-being it is produced, are questions of public space, urban design, and the articulation of the public realm.”⁵ For Toronto, one of the most culturally diverse cities in the world, the answer is making space hospitable for a polyphony of voices to sound within it. However, an important question remains: to what extent does a Culture Plan that focuses so myopically on one ideal type of citizen actually make room for the multitudes?

Indeed, the predilections of the creative class are not encouraging for the socially minded. As Florida explains, “[w]hile to a certain extent participants [of] (focus groups and interviews) acknowledge the importance of community, they did not want it to be invasive, or to prevent them from pursuing their own lives. Rather, they desired what I have termed ‘quasi-anonymity.’”⁶ It remains unclear at this juncture whether a city of quasi-anonymous individuals, who are first and foremost interested in pursuing their personal life projects, bodes well or ill for the city and its inhabitants. Ultimately, what it comes down to is whether the city is populated with fragmented and self-serving individuals or a community of citizens mindful of the common good.

If Florida’s creative class is indeed the future of Toronto as a Creative City, then it heralds a vision of a city fraught with social uncertainty—one where cultural capital waxes as social capital wanes. But as sociologist Zygmunt Bauman reminds us, a city is “a common good which cannot be reduced to the aggregate of individual purposes and as a shared task which cannot be exhausted by a multitude of individual pursuits... which is (and

2 Charles Landry and Franco Bianchini, *The Creative City* (London, UK: Demos, 1995), 10.

3 Barbara Jenkins, “Toronto’s Cultural Renaissance,” *Canadian Journal of Communication* (2005): 169-186, 30.

4 Jenkins, 30.

5 Malcolm Miles, *Art, Space, and the City: Public Art and Urban Futures* (London, UK: Routledge, 1997), 189.

6 Richard Florida, *Cities and the Creative Class* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2004), 30.

7 Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Modernity* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2000), 96.