

My City's Still Breathing

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Unless you are a big fan of the cold and snow, Winnipeg may not be your first choice for a November getaway. Last fall, however, more than 250 creative minds from Canada, the United States, Europe, and Australia braved the frigid temperatures to participate in “My City’s Still Breathing: A Symposium Exploring the Arts, Artists and the City.” Together, they offered an array of perspectives and experiences that, when sparked by the impressive caliber of speakers, ignited stimulating dialogue and debate on every conceivable connection point between artists and the cities in which they are born, live, create, die, and imprint their legacies.

As a public administrator I sought to engage in conversations related to my field, but this symposium had a life of its own and my best-laid plans were interrupted by big doses of inspiration and introspection. The keynote lectures pushed and prodded and at times made my heart pump in dizzying thuds. It was more than a symposium; it was a revelation.

Although Australian advocate Jon Hawkes rambled a bit on culture as a necessary pillar of sustainability, he referenced the endurance of primitive cultures and stressed the importance of citizen *participation* in the arts, not just passive observation. He noted that “[as] the embodied set of values that any city has...culture must be brought to bear on all city planning and policy making.” Furthermore, he called cities out for trying to “be” something other than what they are, saying that “government’s primary responsibility is to its constituents...no one else. Stop trying to be some other place and do things for some other audience.”

Matthew Lennon, director of civic art with the Houston Arts Alliance, reminded us that public art is “about place, not object.” It is art that is informed by the city and informs the city. He spoke about the city as *icon* and art as *experience*, suggesting



that we should all be working toward an “internationally recognized collection of *experiences*.” Lennon also warned against the installation of CRAP—culturally regimented artistic product—or plop art.

I was particularly impressed to learn that the city of London (UK) employs a cultural economist, Allan Freeman. His job is to interpret the economic impact of culture, a job that he, as a self-confessed numbers geek and art enthusiast, loves. Freeman’s theory is simple: Art has a social impact, which has a civic impact, which has an economic impact. If we understand cities as hubs to facilitate exchange, and as places where cultures meet, then cities are places where meaning is created. Public artists interpret these new meanings and help us understand ourselves in the context of our city. Their art serves as a way to reorient ourselves within our surroundings time and time again.

Beyond the wealth of knowledge and insight provided by the keynote speakers, this symposium’s success was the result of its local orientation and global relevance. Winnipeg took a risk. It opened itself up for us to explore, dissect, examine, and critique it as a place. Artists shared their bittersweet city-love, administrators argued the need for plans, planners argued the need for art, and through it all we saw ourselves, we heard our voices, and we thought about how we could create and enhance those same vital connections between the arts, artists, and the cities in which we live.

“My City’s Still Breathing” (artsforall.ca) reminded me that cities are people and people are inherently creative. Cities are suffused with possibilities even as they carry forward past legacies. As artists and public art administrators, we must strive to generate experiences that celebrate, encourage, and spark an ongoing exchange of ideas that create new meaning in our cities. That’s what Winnipeg did.



ABOVE: Items from Winnipeg’s Arts for All. TOP RIGHT: Symposium reception at Plug-In Gallery.

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