

Imagine Toronto Address for Toronto Culture Staff Retreat, 2006.

Delighted to be speaking to you, the industrious workers of Toronto culture. You are after all the stewards of well being, civic well being, because culture means health. No matter how prosperous a town looks, if it doesn't have culture, i.e. a civilized way of looking at what it has done well and what it can imagine--the city is bankrupt. You are the unsung and sometimes maligned heroes of the struggle for civic legacy.

Rita Davies has asked me to say a few words about the creative cities project and its relationship to the city and its future. Hard to congratulate the project without the acknowledgement of the Livewithculture program, a zeitgeist for creative spirit in Toronto. I must also congratulate the work done by you, the staff, the accomplishment of Nuit Blanche and your efforts in other cultural projects that pepper this town with excitement and zeal.

Curiosity is the hidden resource of the people of this town, and Livewithculture has released it and the creative cities report seeks to nurture it.

The creative cities strategies report is a hallmark document; a blueprint, for all Canadian cities to come on board the 21st century as creative cities. The enthusiasms for Richard Florida aside, the creative agenda is urgent not just as a tool for prosperous economies, but for arriving at a sustainable and serene quality of life. For we will not have sustainable cities until we managed civic care, and creativity is the only means we have right now of reinstating civic care. Many of you have heard me say this before; creativity is not possible without civic trust, and civic trust is possible through the exercise of the creative. Shared forums of wonder, the ability to play together, discover together, imagine together, even touch the sublime together--these are the seductions that creativity uses to restore a quality of trust to the civic body. Agendas won't do it, political exhortations won't do it. I think we know, finally, that diversity is our talent. We are convinced now that Toronto (as we hoped it would) has begun to fall in love with itself. If it isn't an out and out romance, we have waves of infatuation. Even the hard-boiled skeptics have a crush on a city that not long ago was a plain dowager afraid of donning a few cosmetics.

Thanks to Rita Davies, The Toronto Culture Plan, and the help of a mayor sympathetic to culture, the curiosity of Torontonians finally awakened by the clarion calls of Nuit Blanche and other capital projects---we have a town that has everything going for it. And the Creative Cities Strategies project is a roadmap for how to get us to where we want to go-- right into the civic heart; the heart that wants to, not just be proud of Toronto, but wants to *rejoice* in Toronto. Rejoice! ...for as I said when I helped launch the report at MarS--in the future cities will only be known for their enthusiasm.

All cities will have similar drawing cards, the same amenities, the same market seductions, with somewhat different clichés of tourism. All a city can offer is a style of enthusiasm that uniquely releases its gifts. The report, we believe, is a major engine for that enthusiasm.

The report comes of several years work, funded by the Toronto and Ontario

Governments, and is the distillation of the efforts of a leadership team that met on numerous occasions and traveled to other cities to compare best practices. It is a comprehensive report designed to persuade, beyond the shadow of a doubt, that “creativity means business”—literally. It is an inventory of Toronto’s creative assets and an exhortation to lever those assets into a competitive signature for the future. It has no precedent, and is an invaluable resource for Toronto culture.

Those here today are in the premiere position of facilitating these report. Culture workers are the midwives of big ideas. Cities have the resource of social capital, We have in this room the capital resource of bright thinking. I will say to you the same things I would say to the champions of culture in this city, in private and public sector; for we are all alike in what we need to do in the future.

Toronto is not wanting for talent, or "strivers", as Andy Barrie would say---there is no shortage of ideas, initiatives, from Luminato, to Humanitas, waterfront revitalization, museums, galleries, architectural design panels, festivals, the new opera house, ballet, bohemia...the list goes on and on.

Toronto must do one thing only to become a world class city---it must unite, not as a system of alliances and transient partnerships, but as a communion of ideas funneled into one thing--a loyalty for this town. A proclaimed loyalty that will not brook partial communication or vested interest--a loyalty that means we don't play the urban competition with our cards close to our chests, a loyalty that wells up from private affection into a proclaimed devotion to a family of urban grace.

All Canadian cities must do as much, if they want to enter the global arena. What makes other cities *possibly* more charismatic than Toronto is the solidarity of spirit that puts allegiance back into the civic. If the urban world is overtaking the national and regional as a point of civic referentiality, if most of the world’s people will soon be in cities, then cities must rediscover loyalty.

My point is this. Creative Toronto and the project of Toronto culture cannot fail, if its constituent champions and engineers work together. Our resources and networks are such that we can usher industry, communities and culture into a communion of purpose.

We must learn to talk again about the good of the town, archaic as it may sound. It is the purpose of the creative agenda. We’re not just fostering creativity, we’re not just collaborating with wealth generation, we’re not just furthering the arts, we’re giving a city the only means it has of imagining itself as a way of life that is hopeful and serene.

Creativity doesn’t just mean business. The business of life depends on it. We have too many languages, and this is our common language, creativity---it is a language that transcends cultures and has no need of translation.

We have no common spirituality. And this is a real problem. Sound irrelevant. Sooner or later people will want to share more than the common dollar, and abstract rallying of tolerance, inclusivity, equity. They will want to rejoice in a big common theme, an inspiring theme, in which they recognize each other. Historically, common beliefs did this. In today's climate, we don’t have common beliefs, we have a common respect for what makes a society function, but we don’t have a common seduction to bring us all together. Does it seem odd to ally culture and spirituality. Spirituality is what brings people to love the same things. Creativity is what brings people to share the same vocabulary of love. This is more crucial than we know right now.

Toronto has been spared the explosions of spiritual energies mistakenly ghettoized and misunderstood in European cities. But sooner or later, the untapped energies of privatized spiritualities will seek their expression here, and unless we give people creativity, they will have no common vantage point for universal wonder. And wonder is the only thing that makes people put aside their ideologies, cultures and agenda. Wonder disarms us into mutual recognition. Wonder brings us to a respect for larger meaning, and makes our temporal differences look weak, and insignificant.

What manufactures wonder. If one dares to manufacture it (and we are desperate) one does so with creativity—that enterprise that has brought people to deep meaning for centuries, that enterprise that can restore deep meaning in a superfluous market climate.

Creativity is the spirituality that gets people affirming the same wonder, the same source, with shared gratitude—and it is free from the caveats of stereotype and historical woundedness. It is the imagination seeking identity in the grander scheme of things. That is what is meant by a city as a sacred place. It is a sacred place because it introduces us to a higher version of ourselves. Without that aspiration, it is foolish for us to live in cities. Without that aspiration we are just vulnerable, waiting for the markets of the global to harvest us as laborers and constructors of life styles.

I congratulate you for the awesome responsibility of ushering creativity into a global city . It is a privilege, and I say that consideredly after 40 years of being a poet.

Creativity is a beautiful idea. If it fails it will be our undoing. For it is not an option. The beautiful wins converts; the beautiful recruits the most pedantic into surrendering their skepticism. All we have to do is not let the agendas spoil our focus, not let the exigencies of the fiscal spoil our excitement, not let the tired pessimisms of an old Toronto haunt a new generation of young and new Canadians and halt the inevitable future of creative Toronto.

We believe that the Creative Cities Strategies report is rich and invites further imagining. It's real enemy is not cynicism, but self-interest, and this is our message to the town. All that stands between Toronto the good and Toronto the great is generosity of spirit—and generosity is the first gift of creativity.

Pier Giorgio Di Cicco
Poet Laureate, City of Toronto
Curator, Humanitas Museum and Center for Global Cities