

Keynote for OMBI (Ontario Municipal Benchmarking Initiative): Sheraton Hotel, Hamilton, October, 2008.

Topic: Livable and Sustainable Communities

What is a livable community? Let's face it... a livable community is, in most people's minds, a place that is safe, lucrative, affording a desirable lifestyle, pretty, with lots of amenities and where people mind their own business and that business is interrupted only by negotiated means.

Let me suggest to you, that this would not have been a definition of a livable community even twenty years ago. A livable community once meant a place that honored the foremost requisite and justification for living with people---the ability to engage (as we call it now) with others, the opportunity to seek out other people on the assumption that others held the key to your own destiny; that you discovered and entered the adventure of further meaning in your own life by collaboration with others. Notice how our word have changed to our liking---I have just used the word "engagement"---which twenty years ago would have seemed nonsense. We would have said "involvement" with others. Now the word "involvement" sounds threatening, or at least a chore or encumbrance. Notice I have used the word "collaboration", where once we would have said "joining", or "communion with others" or some term pointing out the possibility of greater intimacy with others. In fact, that was what a city was supposed to be once---a lucky place where you welcomed the possibility of unexpected intimacies. Now, "intimacy" is a branding or advertising ploy-word, because everybody fantasizes intimacy, but in fact, the only intimacy we care to entertain is that approached with great caution, negotiation and the circumspect surrender of many issues, including, privacy issues, safety issues, protocol issues, issues of appropriateness, boundary issues, not to mention the maintenance and bartering of comfort zones.

Let me cut to the chase. We have become a careful and distrusting civic citizenry. The public realm is increasingly disinhabited. Have you noticed the absence of people walking, conversing, encountering, in areas that are perfectly designed for safety, sanitation, convenience, aesthetic? Do we really think "new urbanism" and mixed use development has solved the problem of revitalization? Drive in any urban archipelago for a radius of fifty miles, and you will see the same thing. No matter what the housing, the realty, the subdivision plan... you will see porches with nobody on them, driveways with cars, lights on in houses, and on a perfectly balmy summer night, no one on the streets after 8 pm at night.....the playgrounds empty.

Most people spend more hours in front of screens than they do "engaging" with people. Apart from the planned foray to get retail goods, or to bring the kids to sanctioned environments, whether it be sports or ballet---apart from purposed and planned activity the bulk of the urban phenomenon is poorer and poorer of cohabitation in the sense we once understood it. I should say "conviviality" rather than co-habitation---conviviality

means "living with people". And that means more than living beside people or in proximity to people. It means sharing with people the foundations of true community--- mutual reliance, generosity, hospitality, civic care, curiosity and faith in each other. The fact is, the government knows more about us than our neighbors do. The fact is we distrust the public realm, perhaps for lack of collective belief, perhaps for fear of media driven dangers, perhaps for fear of a deeper ontological vacuum; perhaps for lack of faith altogether-

What has happened? For reasons too numerous to mention we are trying to build cities we would like to brand as livable-----but in fact we like to enjoy ourselves without necessarily enjoying others. We want our children to grow up in the traditional sense of healthy, sound, brave, virtuous, principled, life-embracing...but we live our lives disenfranchising ourselves from the greatest and only educator, the experience of others in the public realm.

The business of the public realm is crucial to the a notion of livable cities. We cannot move ahead to urban citizenship if we do not address the reality of how social capital behaves.

Let me address the subject of urban citizenship. Urban citizenship is the dynamo, the engine and the blossom of a successful city or community. I have already suggested something about the fiber of urban citizenship. It is the public status of the Eros and felt love and loyalty that citizens have for their immediate world. Place means nothing of people do not feel like citizens of their location. And it goes beyond voting and rate-payers meetings, and special interest groups and questions of entitlement to rights, information and services. For information and services become complicated and onerous to manage if the motivation and the happiness of people is not predicated by how they feel about each other. A happy citizen, we must conclude, is one who has engaged creatively with other citizens in the building of homes, vocations, families, neighborhoods and ideals. I am forever addressing creative city conferences with the understanding that you cannot share ideas and innovation without a foundation of trust, freedom and a feeling benevolence and faith in your fellow citizen. Ideas do not jump off of screens. They are generated by the simple delight and enthusiasm of have gotten to know someone and of creating the idea for someone, not just for oneself. This is the incipience of civic care. Most infrastructural, structural, and systemic problems amount to someone, or groups of people having lost "civic care". It ranges from badly mended potholes, to unnecessary protocol that distances people, to the use of consultants and experts where they are not needed, to the simple disregard people have on the street for what the other person might or might not like. This, I will mention later, has everything to do with sustainability.

Healthy urban citizenship means not just pride in the material and lifestyle accomplishments of a city, but a loyal regard for the beauties that city has enacted, whether in architecture, or charity, or bravery or culture. It means people have an affection for the way they have met collective challenges and celebrations. I just came back from moderating the Creative Cities summit in Detroit city, a city that has fallen on hard times and has little to recommend it in the way of investors, tourists, or inhabitants,

for that matter. What I saw was the major hope of any city, especially in the hard times we are about to enter in the global economy. The people have a loyalty and affection for that city, and a persistence and mutual reliance, that will see it through, whatever calamity. To put it simply, they like each other and empathize with each other's plight and delight. Consider, it is not amenities and showpieces that draw tourists and travelers back to those places that are legendary in hospitality----it is the feel of urban citizenship on the street, starting with the way people treat each other with kindness and a deep sense that whatever they are going through, they are doing it together.

This sounds amorphous, but it is the breeding ground of urban citizenship; that sense that people hope together, fight together and can take delight together. It amounts to belief in the fellow citizen and in their capacity to change things. That said, keep in mind that in the recent federal election little more than 50 per cent of Canadian turned out to vote---and our cities are relatively rich in amenities, services and opportunities. I am not comparing American and Canadian cities, but keep in mind that those places that people revisit, the great cities of the world are attractive because the people have a palpable loyalty and affection for legacy, which translated into brand, reputation, vibrant culture and imaginative thinking in solving civic problems. Without this, services, systems, initiatives are bound to be more expensive, redundant, however much good will we bring to bear as servants in the public sector.

As I say this, I remember in the OMBI mission statement.

“The Municipal CAO’s Benchmarking Initiative is the result of a CAO’s partnership effort to continuously strive for service excellence in municipal government. Participating municipalities are working together to identify and share performance statistics, operational best practices and to network in a spirit of innovation and entrepreneurship to push for even greater success.”

It is noble, and presupposes good will and sound urban citizenship among the constituents that we serve. It also presupposes that “working together” means a common dream, common hope. Dream and hope, not shared, not publicized within a community---makes for poor collaboration. A city succeeds, not by “alliances, but by “allegiances”.

Alas, that urban citizenship is something we cannot, as public servants or politicians, generate completely on our own. Though excellence in performance mollify and prevent issues of accountability, accountability we must understand only becomes exponential if citizens have not first exercised "responsibility" towards each other. I think that as a society we have forgotten, that before you can hold anyone accountable, you must have first been responsible. And the first responsibility citizens have in a civic environment is to know each other, understand each other, to be patient with each other, and to believe in each other.

The factors that control this, alas, are out of our hands. Strong, moral, credible and benevolent political leadership may help to generate such an ethos of responsibility, but it is not likely in these times, when leaders themselves are fearful of accountability-a fear that over-rides the visionary nature of public office. This is a generalization. I leave it to you to deconstruct it.

Bear in mind that none of us should be satisfied with the notion of livable cities as merely a place where lifestyle is aggrandized and one is liberally free to conduct one's life as if other people were happenstance players and useful as mere services, information and stake-holders. We are not mere stake holders; we are people who will never save the environment if we do not save it for each other. As David Suzuki once noted---we are one body breathing the same air. Until we have as cohesive a sense of citizenship as that, sustainability will remain a project and not a reverencing of the environment. For we will not reverence the environment until we reverence each other. And to do that we have to know each and embrace again the public realm as a playground and commemoration of the joy of the civic. We have to trust it, and first we have to trust each other, believe in each other. Without that we are left, not with vocations as public servants but as managers of an industry of accountability.

Now the scope of the OMBI, is not, I suggest entirely hostage to the providing of answers to the questions of an embattled and suspicious public market. The speed, the efficiency, the effectiveness of benchmarking must and does alleviate the anxiety and the confusion of even those who are confused in their aims, needs and agendas. Public servants make life easier because they make services and municipal realities understandable. They are the true leaders because they can choose which programs and initiatives are worthwhile and which are redundant. When those who don't know interfere, it is no good being sandwiched between two fronts of accountability. The public servant must than subscribe to the same thing that bolsters urban citizenship everywhere. The ability to take risks.

And that will be the major challenge to all of us in the next few years. Risk taking will be difficult in economic duress and in a political climate where faith is scarce commodity. There will be a tendency to bunker, systemically, economically and civically. It will be up to all of us, as children of the same public realm, to assume and exercise benevolence and to believe the best the people can be without being intimidated by the parsimony of the times.

But there is nothing worse than a parsimony of spirit. It is that which ruins livable cities, economies and sustainability. As Walt Whitman, the American poet, once said. "A great city is that place which has the greatest men and women. Even if it be a few shacks. It is still the greatest city in the world". Those who understand the dynamics of social capital know that a city with such people never remains a place of shacks. It becomes a bustling metropolis, where the delight on peoples faces archives their affection, their loyalty for each other and hope for the future. This is the basis for good economies and cities that work. Because such people come up with ideas, fast, because they trust and know that money follows where vision has happened.

I found in the literature on the OMBI on the internet the following mission objective.

- "In reporting these results, we hope to build further support for and trust in municipal government."

There is no question that the excellence of vocation will accomplish this. I hope only to

have outlined the broader framework in which the public servant or citizen may be frustrated and to outline the higher standard of livability.

However, trust in municipal government begins with trust in communities, and that is a project beyond the scope of councilors and law-makers. For the most part, in Ontario, we are busy obliging the culture of fear by pandering to the hyper-need for safety, surveillance, boundary considerations, property boundaries, licensing, procedures and protocol for what is necessary to allay public fear. Public fear will never be assuaged until community members see in the word “community” the philosophical premise of communion with each other. That is, to become one, obviously not literally, but to be in “union” with each other; not a union of apprehensions and self-interests, but a neighborhood in which citizens see that they are not “independent”, “nor “interdependent”, but dependant on each other, for creativity, for delight, for charity and for hospitality. You do not build these things with mixed use development, or malls, or well-lit excess to the waterfront. Before any place becomes home, you have to have to courage to explore and be curious about another person. And curiosity about other people is the casualty of the times.

To the extent to which public servants can aid the restoration of this foundation, I would exhort all of us to work on that, not which separates or distances people, but by that which brings them together. There is no point to a pedestrian friendly park if there is a bylaw that says “park closes at 11pm”; no point to conferences celebrating the public realm if the conference is swarmed by excessive security measures, no point in a street festival if the parking police are out in droves. As public servants and as citizens we can encourage flexibility of protocol and not cow-tow religiously to the fear of what is liability, not to assume that the well-being of society is in the hands of the politically correct, or those puritans that masquerade their ontological anxiety as a care for the civic sphere. Nuit Blanche in Toronto is an example of the civic imagination released; this release does not require a lawless disposition, but it requires a faith that the civic being will play and learn and discover without concomitant disorder. Municipal administration must know when to stop policing, and relax into the premise of civic delight and expression.

To be sensitive to that which squelches the appetite for life in the citizen,  
-- that is the best any of us can do.

I might add that, as we grow and subsist and choreograph through ever increasing numbers of people we must remember, in whatever walk of life, especially in the world of statistics, that information about a person is not the same as knowledge of a person.

We have, in Ontario, relative to other urban areas, inviting, desirable and operationally successful towns and cities. People choose to come here, increasingly—there is a standard of life and convenience virtually unparalleled anywhere else. Our services, imperfect perhaps, are enviable and social justice and transparency in governance are higher in profile than in most countries. We may fare better economically than most countries in the incoming recession. We have, to our advantage, a resource in social

capital—which is to say Ontarians are a peace-loving people who have inherited by adoption a notion of civility and fairness embraced by those who have traveled here with political and historical deficits. It is our opportunity as citizens and public servants to redefine the word “livable”, to mean that the quality of life is more than the sum total of acquisitions and management of resources. Through an ethic of creativity and benevolence

we can elevate the civic consciousness into an excitement about what a city can be; that is, not just a location, but a home, not just as a place to make a living but a place to make a life, not just as an economy, but a place that is rich in spirit.

Finally, to all of us, so beleaguered by information and yet dealing with and requiring information, that the true barometer of a healthy city is not in statistics, nor in reports, but as the OMBI mission statement suggests, in the “results” and the results are firstly and lastly evident on people’s faces as you walk down the street. Frustration and joy do not need a closer reading. What we have planned or not planned shows up in the expression of the neighbor beside you, not because they have read something in the paper, but because a livable city has been brought home, by the quiet and arduous efforts of those of us who love the city, and most especially by those who have chosen to serve their city as a vocation.

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