

**Remarks of the City of Toronto Poet Laureate Pier Giorgio Di Cicco  
on the occasion of the Mayor's Roundtable on Arts and Culture  
December 7, 2004  
Toronto City Hall, Council Chambers**

I have the choice tonight to either speak a poem, or speak poetically, which are the same thing. I speak briefly on the subject of art, which is not different from the subject of happiness in the city.

A city is not happy owing just to prosperity or economic opportunity. It is happy in the hope and business of human and meaningful things, in whatever sphere of endeavour; and art is about highlighting every sphere of endeavour, until the "artistic" is seen as a way of life, and not just something formalized on the page, on the screen, on the stage. A vibrant urban art teaches the art of life; but if the daily life is not artistic, inspired by intimacy, zest and sociality, the passion is missing, and a city without passion is a city just of artistic events.

We have no shortage of artistic events in Toronto—it rivals any other major city with festivals, openings, schemes, designs and projects.

More of the same does not ensure the purpose of the arts; and the purpose of the arts in a city is to make a city fall in love with itself; by that I mean the seeing of passion at its own source, the joy of seeing what it has made, and the impulse to regenerate that joy in an atmosphere of risk, adventure and trust.

This means a change in attitude... an ability to rejoice well beyond the point of pride. We pride ourselves in Toronto; we respect our accomplishments and our plans. Our congratulations must become rejoicings that spark the impulse to create again and again without cowering under the restraints of conservatism, "correctness" or globalization.

What is required is an essential atmosphere of passion. Without it, we put up bad buildings, invent bandage solutions, and have merely a topology of artistic events cosmetic to daily life.

Fine words. What are the strategies? We have "zero tolerance" for just about any form of abuse, to our credit. Perhaps it is time we had zero tolerance for what enfeebles the passionate imagination of a city. What enfeebles it?

1. The notion that money predicates vision.
2. The mean-spiritedness that criticizes before it allows.
3. The conventions of "safeness" from either the left or the right.
4. Anything that discourages human encounter in the interest of expedience and time-saving.

These are at the root of cultural anaemia. And to discourage such thinking is to begin to create a new attitude. You can't enforce an attitude. You can't legislate the human heart. But, you can inspire it by an example of passion and risk-taking, in an atmosphere in which passion and risk-taking can take place. This is the job of the city at large, to understand that passion and risk begin in daily encounter, on the canvas of everyday life.

At the same time a city's art must give the impression that art is as indispensable a thing as water, or food—elementary and elemental to the quality of life. A great city knows this, at the core. It does not see art as adjacent, peripheral or supplementary, and so the lines between business and culture break down, and all activities are informed by a spirit of adventure and creativity, and commerce and culture cease to be opposites.

Finally, let me say that Toronto has succeeded at just about everything, except looking glamorous to itself; and by glamour I mean a city's attraction to its own uniqueness, moved by the conviction that there is a style of creativity that can only be done here. A city must believe this. "We" must believe this, as artists and citizens, and when we do, the artist and citizen become one; and when the artist and citizen become one, an ethos is created, and art becomes the signature of that ethos.

The public expectation of this has already begun; there has been an increasing sense in the last couple of years in Toronto, (and especially under the present administration led by Mayor David Miller) that the city is about to come into its own, as a haven against, and a cultural blueprint against globalization, as a great experiment in the re-humanization of contemporary life. There is an excitement that carries its own momentum, of which this evening is an expression.

It is hard to resist the apprehension that this city is about to fall in love with itself. To think otherwise is to think without passion.