

**Culture in the Winds of Change:  
Fostering a ‘Culture of Sustainability’ and  
Making the Case for Cultural Indicators**  
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In this day and age, one thing seems increasingly clear, at least in industrialized countries. Human beings have created cultures that are unsustainable.<sup>1</sup> From the uncertain implications of climate change, to the realities of a global economic melt-down and the growing gap between rich and poor, there are few indications that a human population of over 6.5 billion can continue to survive, let alone thrive, on planet Earth. As humanity proceeds down the path of globalization, pluralization and urbanization, there is a niggling question – can we create a global/local ‘culture of sustainability’? If so, what might it look like? How do we move towards it? How do we know if we are getting closer, or drifting ever further from this goal? Culture, like sustainability, is a term that has come to mean different things to different people. Most would agree that history, art, language, food, music and clothing are all part of what we mean by the word ‘culture’ – especially when these attributes have a tradition that stretches back through the generations. Certain types of leisure-time organizations (like museums, galleries, theatres, etc) are commonly thought of as ‘cultural’ – because they specialize in selected aspects of human endeavour that are associated with culture (art, artifacts, music, dance, etc.). In our increasingly pluralistic world, culture is often linked to ethno-cultural countries of origin. Within all these approaches to culture, there is a tendency to point towards the past and ‘the other’, usually at the expense of seeing that culture envelops each of our communities, on a day-to-day basis. Culture may include traditions and the past, and it may even include trips to museums and other leisure-time edutainment organizations; however, first and foremost, culture is the living, changing dynamic of how we live our lives, individually and collectively, locally and globally, consciously and unconsciously.

One of the hallmarks of the modern era has been the fragmenting of the world into areas of specialization. This technique has yielded huge rewards for humanity.

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<sup>1</sup> Many authors have reflected on this problem, including: Alan AtKisson, *Believing Cassandra: An Optimist Looks at a Pessimist’s World*, Chelsea Green (1999); Jane Jacobs, *Dark Age Ahead*, Random House (2004); Ronald Wright, *A Short History of Progress*, Anansi Press (2004); Jerod Diamond, *Collapse: How Societies Choose to Fail or Succeed*, Viking Books (2005); Thomas Homer-Dixon, *The Upside of Down: Catastrophe, Creativity and the Renewal of Civilization*, Viking Books (2005).

Unprecedented advances in knowledge have led to a society of specializations – each one, more often than not, a silo unto itself. Through focused and deep study, engineering, medicine, transportation, finance and more have pushed the limits of what is possible to understand and to do. Yet, something is missing. Humanity lacks a global cultural vision of where it is going as a holistic system, all within the constraints of the biosphere. Central to grappling with the challenge and the opportunity of global sustainability, involves a close look at the term ‘culture’.

Since my background is rooted in museums, I will share a short story about how my understanding of the term ‘culture’ was re-shaped through an inter-cultural experience with a Maori elder. In 1993, I was invited to Australia and New Zealand to deliver a series of lectures and workshops on creativity. The presentations evolved from work I had undertaken at the Art Gallery of Ontario (AGO) and which focused on the creativity of museum visitors. Through experiments conducted at the AGO, in Toronto, Canada, I began to think about museums as ‘places of the muses’. Of course the museum was a physical place, but my interest was rooted in a state of mind of visitors that has psychological, social and even spiritual dimensions. In this place of creativity a person reflects upon aspects of their lives that they normally don’t think much about – opening themselves up to the emergence of new insights. Nurturing creative responses of visitors to artworks frequently generated psychic energy that often surprised and delighted viewers. This research has suggested to me that cultural professionals would benefit from developing an appreciation of visitor-based creativity to complement the work they do on artist-based creativity. This work can be explored elsewhere.<sup>2</sup> The point here is that my research had captured the interest of staff at the Te Papa Museum in Wellington, New Zealand. Two Maori elders, both of whom worked at the museum, attended the workshop I gave. What was quite unexpected to me sprang from the time I spent with one of the elders, Bessie Walters, would help me to change my understanding of culture fundamentally.

After the workshop, I was invited by “Auntie Bessie” to spend the following morning with her in the Maori gallery. Before traveling to New Zealand, I had learned that, in the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century, the colonial government had signed the *Treaty of Waitangi*,<sup>3</sup> thereby laying a bi-cultural foundation for the country. However, this treaty quickly became marginalized and ineffective until later in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. One of the outcomes of the renewed interest in working with this treaty was that, at the Te Papa Museum, Maori would be responsible for, and have authority over, collections that were part of their cultural heritage. At the time I walked into the museum to meet Auntie Bessie, I did not know exactly what to expect.

As I entered the cavernous space at the museum entrance, I was awed by the magnificent objects before me – including huge ocean-faring canoes, houses, sculptures

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<sup>2</sup> See Worts, Douglas, “Extending the Frame: Forging a New Partnership with the Public”, in *New Research in Museum Studies: Art in Museums*, Susan Pearce (Ed), Athlone Press (1995); and “The Animated Muse: An Interpretive Program for Creative Viewing”, in *Curator: the Museum Journal*, Alta Mira Press, vol 48, #3, (2005).

<sup>3</sup> See the following website, [www.nzhistory.net.nz/category/tid/133](http://www.nzhistory.net.nz/category/tid/133)

and more. Across the room Bessie waved me over and extended a warm welcome. Then, she turned to a life-sized, wooden sculpture and introduced me to this male figure as an ancestor. My look must have betrayed my confusion as to what to do or say next – how should one respond to being introduced to a wooden carving? There was a twinkle in Bessie’s eye as she said, “you can’t just stand there, you need to touch him”. Confusion turned to nervousness as an inner voice said, “you are a museum professional... you know that artifacts are NOT to be touched, at least not without cotton gloves”! Another twinkle in Bessie’s eye led to her taking my hands and, while planting them on the wooden carving, said that I couldn’t just stand there, but I needed to “caress” the figure. At that point I knew I had begun a cultural experience unlike any I had had before. For the next three hours Bessie and I explored the museum’s extensive collection of Maori ‘taonga’ (treasures) – touching everything as we proceeded. I learned how these objects embodied the living energy of Maori ancestors – not simply representations of people from the past, but the ancestors themselves were present. Bessie spoke of her relationship to the ancestors – that she was part of a continuum. She told me that her ancestors had come to the land, now known as New Zealand, centuries earlier and had killed the original inhabitants of the islands. When she declared that not a day went by that she did not reflect on how the responsibility for the actions of her ancestors now rested on her shoulders, I was thunder-struck. At that moment, I gained an insight into the saying that culture involves ‘standing on the shoulders of ancestors’. It seems increasingly important to recognize how we, as individuals, do not arrive at the lives we live just through our personal experiences and choices. Rather, we are largely defined by the values, attitudes, beliefs and deeds of those who preceded us. In our contemporary world, especially in the West, individual lives seem so focused on the challenges and opportunities of the present that one might think that the past is largely irrelevant. And yet, for much of human history, it has been a combination of wisdom, rooted in the experiences and insights of elders, along with the contemporary challenges and connections of the younger generation that has enabled cultures to grow and change. In contrast, today’s civil society tends to privilege the knowledge associated with expertise more than the wisdom that comes from a lifetime of human experience. The morning I spent with Auntie Bessie has reverberated within my changing perspective of culture for almost 20 years, and will probably continue to do so for years to come.

Which brings me to the critical question that all cultural organizations, and society as a whole, would benefit from reflecting on and discussing... what do we mean by the term ‘culture’? American psychologist Edgar Shein has posited that culture is “a basic pattern of assumptions invented, discovered or developed by a given group as it learns to cope with its problems of external adaptation and internal integration”.<sup>4</sup> To think about culture as a process of active adaptation and integrated consciousness helps enormously to overcome the limitations of culture being understood as entirely rooted in the past, or being associated with a class of contemporary edutainment/entertainment

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<sup>4</sup> Quote by Edgar Shein, in “The lens of organizational culture” (p. 40), by Daniel Kertzner, in *Mastering Civic Engagement: A Challenge to Museums*, American Association of Museums (2002)

that exists in leisure-time contexts<sup>5</sup>. In the light of Shein’s definition, all activities of human endeavour, including economic systems, social dynamics and relationships with the natural environment, become important centrepieces of our evolving and increasingly globalized culture. This approach leaves us wondering about how the dynamics of culture play themselves out in day-to-day reality.

The work of Buzz Holling, a biologist and central figure in the study of complex systems, offers a model that may be extremely helpful to those trying to understand culture in our contemporary world. By studying forest ecosystems over five decades, Holling saw a predictable pattern emerge that has become known as the ‘adaptive renewal cycle’. Essentially, there are four parts to the cycle – exploitation; conservation; release; reorganization (figure 1).

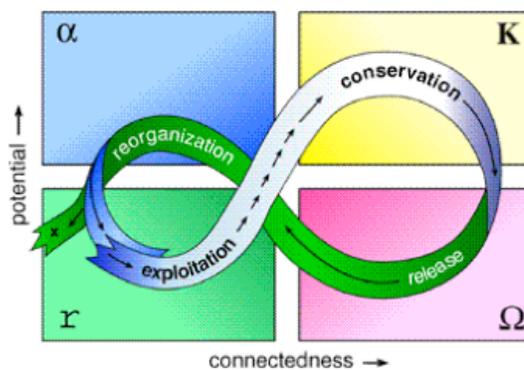


Figure 1: Adaptive Renewal Cycle, Holling, C. S. 2004. From *Complex Regions to Complex Worlds*. *Ecology and Society* 9(1): 11. [online] URL: <http://www.ecologyandsociety.org/vol9/iss1/art11/>

Holling writes:

*For an ecosystem such as a forest, think of the century- or centuries-long cycle of succession and growth from pioneer species (r) to climax species (K) followed by major disturbances such as fire, storm, or pest (Ω). Such disturbances occur as wealth accumulates and the system becomes gradually less resilient, i.e., more vulnerable. As a consequence, a disturbance is created to release accumulated nutrients and biomass and reorganize them into the start*

<sup>5</sup> See work of Douglas Worts, “Fostering a Culture of Sustainability”, *Museums and Social Issues*, vol. 1, no. 2, (2006); Robert Janes, Glenn Sutter and Amaraswar Galla all of whom provide insights on this topic. Specifically, see: Robert Janes *Museums in a Troubled World: Renewal, Irrelevance or Collapse*, Routledge (2009); Glenn Sutter “Thinking Like a System: Are museums up to the challenge?”, *Museums and Social Issues*, vol. 1, no. 2, (2006); Amaraswar Galla, “Ecomuseology, Globalisation and Sustainable Development: Ha Long Bay, A Case Study from Vietnam”, *Humanities Research Journal*, Issue 1 (2002). Also see *Our Creative Diversity: Report of the World Commission on Culture and Development*, United Nations (1995)

*of a new cycle (α). That reorganization can then exploit the novelty that accumulates but is resisted or lies latent during the forward loop.*<sup>6</sup>

Adaptive Renewal applies to human situations as well as to natural ecosystems. For example, when two compatible people meet through a chance encounter they seize the opportunity and begin to build a relationship – this is the phase in which they explore the potential as a couple (**exploitation**). Tremendous energy is often produced during the early phase of a relationship, not only physically, but also emotionally and psychologically. The second phase (**conservation**), involves the growing complexity of the relationship. Resilience is created to help protect the system from being disrupted or destroyed by external shocks. In an evolving human relationship, domestication and routine often set in during the ‘mature’ phase of the cycle, with all of the complexity that that can entail. Throughout this phase, threats and pressures from outside the system will try to disrupt the equilibrium. Invariably, the third phase (**release**) will appear. Here, the relationship will be confronted with a variety of crises that lead either to a letting go of certain old attitudes, or to a collapse. In the former, the relationship attempts to creatively adapt, while in the latter, the relationship disappears, leaving both parties free to look opportunistically at the range of options available in the larger social context (**reorganization**).

Other social examples of adaptive renewal can be found in the dynamics of career-development. Here, it is possible for someone to experience many adaptive restructurings of their career over a period of years or decades. In other instances, a career path may be abandoned when external conditions converge that encourage a complete break with one’s career, leaving that person to explore and exploit other options.

At a societal level, one can see the hallmarks of adaptive renewal at the macro level. An example of this is seen in the use of energy. When human beings discovered that the power of fire could be harnessed through the burning of wood, there were countless benefits to be gleaned. However, eventually, energy from burning wood became problematic in a number of ways and societies became open to the opportunities made available by burning coal. This opened the door to the industrial revolution, which had profound impacts on people in every corner of society. Yet problems with pollution and the desire to achieve goals that required liquid fuel soon led to the decline of coal and the ascent of oil and gasoline. As with both wood and coal-based fuels, petroleum fuels enjoyed tremendous opportunistic integration into the fabric of human lifestyles. And after a century of wildly successful exploitation, the pressures of climate change and pollution are conspiring to topple oil from its pre-eminent perch as the fuel of choice.

If we look at the notion of culture as an adaptive process, then it is critical to pay attention to the ever-changing contexts within which humans live. To this end, our

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<sup>6</sup> *ibid*

society's dependence on, even addiction to, energy, is a defining characteristic of our culture. Similarly, the age we live in, which has facilitated revolutions in transportation, communication and production technologies, is central to who we are – both as individuals and as collectives. The mass migration of huge populations – primarily as seen as movement from the country to the city and from one region of ethno-cultural roots to urban settings throughout the world – is another defining characteristic of human culture in the early years of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. One of the outcomes of this migration has been the pluralization and urbanization of a great many human settlements.

Whereas human beings historically have lived within relatively local precincts, for the past few centuries, the entire planet increasingly has become humanity's frame of reference. Driven by technological advances, as well as the expansion of global markets for goods and services, the very nature of human culture is transforming. It isn't that traditional notions of ethno-cultural identity that are rooted in the heritage of a particular place have become irrelevant, rather identity has become considerably more complex and layered through the globalization process. Another factor that has become a central aspect of identity today is linked to urbanization and the emergence of a civil society. Whereas traditional cultures spent a great deal of time and energy struggling to relate to the many aspects of life that remain mysterious and unknown, civil society largely ignores what it can't control through economics, expertise and brute force. It is in this context that I developed my own definition of 'culture' to help clarify the cultural challenges that lie ahead.

## **Culture**

*.... all of the ways in which a people relate to those aspects of life which:  
a) they can know and control; as well as,  
b) those they can't fully know or control, but to which they must have a  
conscious relationship.<sup>7</sup>*

To suggest that culture is fundamentally a dynamic of relationships is not novel. However, as one lays out the various ways in which humans build their networks of relationships, the challenges of creating a sustainable, globalized culture becomes clearer (see Fig 2). Modern cultures of civil societies seem to have lost a sense of humility that comes from grappling with the mysterious power of the universe that is beyond human understanding and control. Such humility could help to ensure that the 'precautionary principle' is applied, especially as it pertains to climate change. But for many, the absence of full scientific certainty about the cause/effect nature of changes to Earth's climate is reason enough to ignore the clear signals of a shifting environmental reality. I've come to believe that what is needed is a set of cultural identities that enable each of us to stretch our individual consciousness to embrace not only personal and local realities (human and environmental), but also

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<sup>7</sup> Definition developed by Douglas Worts. First published in "On the Brink of Irrelevance?: A Glimpse into Art Museums in Contemporary Society", *ICOM Canada Bulletin*, Ottawa: CHIN, #14, (2002)

include the global reality. Whether we like it or not, globalized economics, systems of product manufacturing and unfettered mobility are linking each of us to every corner of the planet. Accordingly, there is a need for each of us individually, as well as through our collective systems, to become more conscious of the ramifications of those connections. In turn, it is essential to modify our individual and collective behaviours so that each of us contributes to a sustainable world for all people, within a biosphere that has limitations.

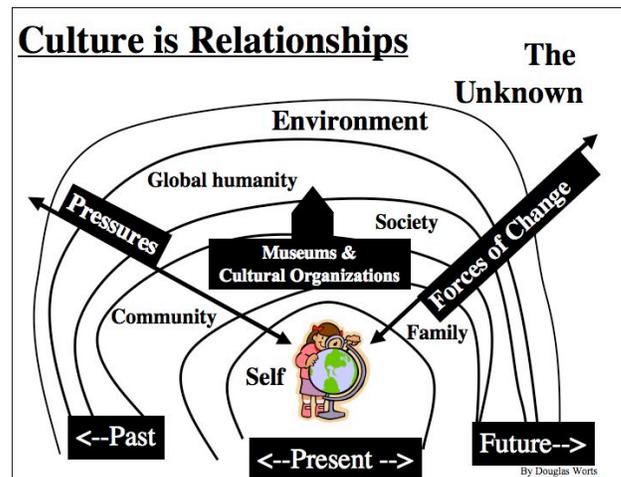


Fig 2

The argument being put forward here is that ‘culture’ is the foundation of human values, beliefs, attitudes and behaviours that make up our lived reality (see Fig. 3). As such the classic model of ‘sustainable development’, which includes three equal, overlapping spheres (environment, society and economy), can be re-envisioned as showing three differently scaled spheres, resting on the foundation of culture.<sup>8</sup>

Many people have criticized the classic sustainability model because all human life, including the economy, exists wholly within the biosphere – which is why I have represented it here as the largest and all-encompassing sphere. As a sub-set of the environment, ‘society’ leaves room within the environment for the countless other species that belong to Earth’s biosphere. The smallest sphere is set aside for the economy. Represented in this way, the economy is put into a more balanced perspective with society and environment. It is ironic that the economy, which is a tool of society, has for over a century been accepted widely as a more significant indicator of societal well being than either the general welfare of people or the health of the natural environment. The novel addition here is the placement of the society and economic spheres on top of the foundation of culture, within which are the values, attitudes, beliefs and behaviours that direct human activity.

<sup>8</sup> There are numerous instances of recasting the classic sustainability model as embedded spheres.

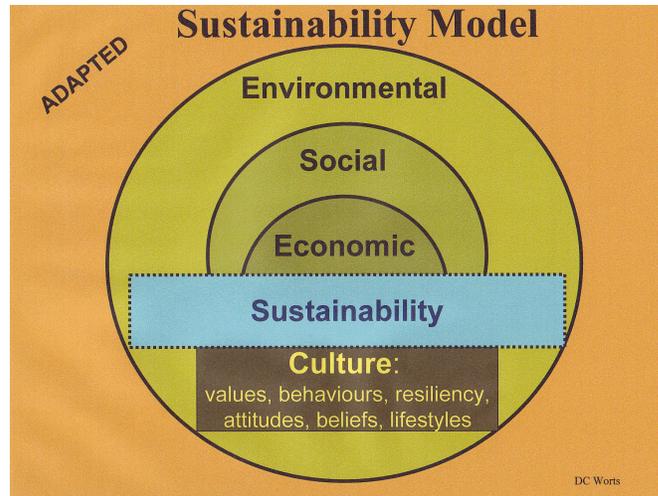


Fig. 3

A natural question emerges about what specifically is contained within the ‘cultural foundation’ in this model. Following is a non-exhaustive list of capacities that belong here. A ‘culture of sustainability’ will include the following capacities, at individual and collective levels:

- for reflectiveness
- for participation/engagement in what is relevant
- for treating others with equity, trust and respect
- for creating a vision of how humans can live sustainably on the Earth
- for relatedness – compassionate connection to others and to the environment
- for awareness of histories – and an ability to learn from the past
- for creativity - to have faith in it personally
- for conscious systems of knowledge - including values
- for connection to the symbolic and the spiritual
- for conscious connection to what cannot be fully understood or controlled
- for responsible action
- for ability to embrace change.

These are just some of the critical aspects needed to foster a ‘culture of sustainability’ in a world that is facing serious challenges of spiraling population, environmental degradation and huge social inequities.

Having worked for over 25 years in museums, where ‘success’ is normally measured in terms of attendance and revenue in exhibits, the above list of cultural capacities make the traditional criteria for judging impacts of cultural strategies seem particularly inadequate.

In fact, contemporary cultures have so far failed to develop effective feedback loops that can guide society’s mechanisms for identifying and addressing the cultural,

social, economic and environmental needs of a quickly and dramatically changing world towards sustainability. Globalizing economic, manufacturing and market systems have transformed the world in dramatic ways over the past century. This has been a work in progress for many centuries – heralded by the adventures of early traders and explorers. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, two World Wars helped to strengthen the foundation for greater interconnectedness of all humans who share this planet. Joining countries together to achieve military and economic goals was a natural evolution. Yet the resulting social, economic and cultural implications of these elements of globalization have not adequately produced effective feedback loops in order to adjust and curtail the most destructive aspects of globalization.

With the powerful motivation of maximized economic growth and profit in hand, corporations, governments and influential individuals have pushed the economy to the forefront of all human considerations. It is now time for humanity to stop, breathe deeply, and take stock of the perils and opportunities that lie ahead for us as a species. There seems to be little disagreement that our current world is unsustainable, but unless we change the values that guide our economic systems, the future will not be kind – environmentally, socially, economically or culturally.

There are economists who challenge the dominant growth-based economic approach to human wellbeing. In Canada, Mark Anielski and Peter Victor<sup>9</sup> are two such leaders who strongly argue that to focus on simple economic growth is not only destructive for humanity and the planet, but that privileging growth misses the real power of the economy to create a sustainable world. In the USA, Herman Daly has been a strong voice for a ‘steady-state economy’ for decades.<sup>10</sup> Daly recently called for a re-tooling of the global economy. He writes:

The Earth as a whole is approximately a steady state. Neither the surface nor the mass of the earth is growing or shrinking; the inflow of radiant energy to the Earth is equal to the outflow; and material imports from space are roughly equal to exports (both negligible)... The most important change in recent times has been the enormous growth of one subsystem of the Earth, namely the economy, relative to the total system, the ecosphere.... The closer the economy approaches the scale of the whole Earth the more it will have to conform to the physical behavior mode of the Earth. That behavior mode is a steady state—a system that permits qualitative development but not aggregate quantitative growth. Growth is more of the same stuff; development is the same amount of better stuff (or at least different stuff). The remaining natural world no longer is able to provide the sources and sinks for the metabolic throughput necessary to sustain the existing oversized economy—much less a growing one.... Throughput growth means pushing more of the same food through an ever larger digestive tract; development means eating better food and digesting it

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<sup>9</sup> See Mark Anielski, *The Economics of Happiness: Building Genuine Wealth*, New Society Publishers, (2007); Peter Victor, *Managing Without Growth: Slower by Design not Disaster*, Edward Elgar Publishing, (2008).

<sup>10</sup> For example, see Herman Daly, *Toward a Steady State Economy*, W.H. Freeman & Co Ltd, (1973).

more thoroughly. Clearly the economy must conform to the rules of a steady state—seek qualitative development, but stop aggregate quantitative growth.<sup>11</sup>

But it is not only economists who are ringing the bell for economic review and change—artists, scientists, theologians and even some business people are doing so as well.

I've chosen to note three figures in the art world whose artworks provide compelling feedback loops that are helping to shift aspects of our cultural unconscious in the West, towards consciousness. Edward Burtynsky, a Canadian photographer, has produced artwork around the world that brings a magnifying glass to where industry, society, economics and environment intersect. One powerful series of photos depicts collateral costs of decades of trans-oceanic shipping of goods. Burtynsky wondered what happened to old freighters after they no longer could sail the seas safely. He found some of them on the beaches of Bangladesh, where local business 'entrepreneurs' purchased the vessels for next to nothing. Then hundreds of local people, keen to earn money, would use cutting torches to disassemble the metal hulks. These workers were provided no safety equipment (like goggles or gloves) and frequently worked without shoes. The artist was so horrified by the situation that he purchased 2000 pairs of safety goggles and gave them to the business owner to distribute to the workers. For anyone who takes for granted the availability of cheap goods, frequently made in developing countries with little or no employment or environmental regulations, seeing one of Burtynsky's images is a wake-up call.<sup>12</sup> Chris Jordan, a Seattle-based artist, uses computer-manipulated images to make beautiful, but shocking mirrors on product and service consumption in the United States.<sup>13</sup> Swedish artist, Jenny Bergstrom, has created a compelling artwork for public spaces that is designed to alert commuters to the largely invisible threat of air pollution.<sup>14</sup>

Globalization is here to stay, and there is little doubt that it can deliver many benefits. But there are many hidden aspects of global economics and business that, if allowed to continue unchecked, will prove deleterious to the health of all. Monitoring and feedback systems are needed so that governments, businesses, as well as each citizen, can monitor how actions at all level sends both positive and negative ripple effects across the planet.

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<sup>11</sup> Herman Daly, "A Steady-State Economy: A failed growth economy and a steady-state economy are not the same thing; they are the very different alternatives we face", Sustainable Development Commission, UK (April 24, 2008)

<sup>12</sup> See Edward Burtynsky's work at [www.edwardburtynsky.com/](http://www.edwardburtynsky.com/). Specifically, see Works: Ships: Ship-Breaking..

<sup>13</sup> See artworks by Chris Jordan, at [www.chrisjordan.com](http://www.chrisjordan.com). The section on "Running the Numbers: An American Self-Portrait" is particularly powerful.

<sup>14</sup> See artwork by Jenny Bergstrom, a Swedish artist who has created interesting artworks addressing the problem of air pollution - [www.jennybergstrom.com/scripts/Page.asp?id=297](http://www.jennybergstrom.com/scripts/Page.asp?id=297)

How will the colossal task of forging a global, sustainable culture of humanity be undertaken? Is it possible to stretch human consciousness from the individual, to the local/regional world of everyday life, and then beyond to the global realities of our contemporary world? Who will be part of the crafting of a global framework for a ‘culture of sustainability’ that not only respects the heritage of each individual, but also brings everyone together in the spirit of peace and happiness for all? I remain optimistic that human ingenuity is capable of rising to meet such challenges head on – although it may well take some significant crisis to precipitate this type of meaningful, societal change.

If we acknowledge that a successful future for humanity will require the fostering of ‘a culture of sustainability,’ then what roles might we envision for cultural organizations, like museums? Such institutions contain a great deal of embedded capital – not only in their collections and buildings, but also in their staffs and volunteers. And yet, few have embraced the cultural challenges of sustainability. Nonetheless, there is a growing movement that is encouraging museums to focus more on the needs of their communities and the issues confronting humanity. As a founding member of the Canadian Working Group on Museums and Sustainable Communities<sup>15</sup>, my colleagues and I developed a planning tool to help museums seize the opportunities available to them through embracing the sustainability challenge. The Critical Assessment Framework (CAF – see Fig. 4), uses a stratified approach that helps planners to develop public engagement strategies that address the needs and opportunities related to 1) individuals, 2) communities, 3) the museum itself, and, 4) the global reality.<sup>16</sup> When considering a range of possible public program options, members of a planning team can use the CAF to ask themselves whether the various strategies are capable of achieving certain goals. The questions are designed not as performance indicators, but the questions encourage planners to identify meaningful indicators that will help ensure that the multi-faceted cultural goals are met. A rating scale is provided in the CAF, not for recording or demonstrating the ‘objective’ strength of any particular strategy, but rather to spotlight how members of the planning team may envision the impacts of the program differently. These variations in perceptions and assumptions become topics of conversation as the team continues its process of clarifying the project and its desired outcomes.

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<sup>15</sup> For more information on the Working Group, see <[http://worldviewsconsulting.org/?page\\_id=47](http://worldviewsconsulting.org/?page_id=47)>

<sup>16</sup> see Douglas Worts, “Measuring Museum Meanings: A Critical Assessment Framework”, *Journal of Museum Education*, vol 31, #1, Spring 2006, Left Coast Press, pp. 41-49.

## Critical Assessment Framework

Douglas Worts & Glenn Sutter - WorldViews Consulting – Apr/2008

### Criteria for assessing initiatives aimed at 4 levels of cultural adaptation

(Rating performance without indicators is subjective. Discussions are useful and will generate criteria.)

When considering a new public program initiative, ask how well the program will:	Poorly		to		Well		N/A
	1	2	3	4	5		
<b>Personal Level (members of community)</b>							
Contribute and/or generate new insights							
Capture imagination							
Stimulate curiosity							
Encourage personal reflection							
Enhance ability to think critically and creatively							
Provide opportunity to examine and clarify values							
Demonstrate relevance and make connection to daily life							
Affirm, challenge, deepen identity							
Help develop a sense of place							
Help deal with complexity and uncertainty							
Increase responsible action							
Stimulate intrinsic motivation							
<b>Community Level</b>							
Address vital and relevant needs / issues / opportunities within community							
Generate information and connection at the personal, community, provincial/territorial, national and global level							
Engage a diverse public							
Provide a voice for diverse groups							
Encourage social interactions and debate							
Act as a catalyst for action							
Stimulate intergenerational interactions							
Link existing community groups to one another							
Initiate or enhance long term collaborative relationships							
Partnerships empower community groups							
Enhance the credibility of all involved							
Result in products and processes that have tangible impact in the community							
<b>Institutional Level</b>							
Challenge personal and institutional assumptions							
Guided by clearly articulated goals, objectives and outcomes							
Use the most effective vehicle for achieving goals							
Create a community of learning within staff							
Integrate scientific, local and traditional knowledge							
Act as catalyst for partnering community organizations							
<b>Global Level</b>							
Address issues of global significance – revealing links to local realities							
Foster global ecosystem health							
Reduce global ecological footprint							
Enhance global social justice and equity							
Foster public consciousness of global impacts of local choices							

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For elaboration, see: Worts, Douglas, "Measuring Museum Meanings: A Critical Assessment Framework", *Journal of Museum Education*, vol 31, #1, Spring 2006, Walnut Creek, California: Left Coast Press, pp. 41-49

Fig 4

One thing that has become clear to me is that for any museum to follow the framework of the CAF, towards the goal of ‘a culture of sustainability’, it must re-examine its core values, principal activities, assumed essential skill sets and performance indicators. For institutions, like museums, that have been organized around:

- a) discipline-base, academic specializations (e.g. providing authoritative views of science, art, history, archaeology, etc);
- b) systematic ‘professional’ activities (e.g. collecting, preserving, documenting, etc.), and;
- c) a narrow range of public engagement strategies (e.g. exhibits, lectures, collection-based publications, etc.),

there is great resistance to embracing the challenges of fostering a ‘culture of sustainability’. Perhaps this is not hard to understand, since the identity of such an organization, and its entire staff, is heavily invested in the institutional status quo. It is not that existing skills are unnecessary, but that there are critical new skills that have to be cultivated in order to help society move towards sustainability – skills

such as facilitating personal reflection, encouraging community dialogue and motivating the public to be involved in creating a sustainable society.

The resistance to change within museums may be considered similar to that in the world of business. This is so, because central assumptions about the purpose, function and outcomes of these organizations have to be redefined. For instance, existing business models have been built around the primary goal of maximizing profit. They have done this by doing what is necessary to a) maximum revenues, b) reducing expenses to the bare minimum, and c) through externalizing any costs that they can get away with - e.g. not taking responsibility for the loss of local ecosystems as a result of a polluting mine or clear-cutting lumbering operation. Sustainability will require that all business costs are calculated and properly paid for if our capitalist economy is to contribute to a sustainable world. In this context, any suggestion that business should become oriented to operating in a 'steady-state' economy, as discussed above, and incorporating full-cost accounting, is viewed as anathema, if not an outright assault on business itself. Similarly, cultural organizations are likely to hold tight to their traditional modus operandi – at least until they see that the stakes are higher than preserving existing corporate operations.

On the positive side, many cultural organizations are discussing the need for new forms of cultural leadership and public relevance within communities. Some of this is taking the form of a burgeoning interest in the 'greening' of museums (e.g. reducing Green-House Gases, energy efficiency, recycling, etc.). This may be a starting point for museums, but much more is required if the cultural challenges that permeate the world are to be addressed.

The world is at a crossroads. Human life, as we have known it on our planet, seems unsustainable. Changes to virtually all aspects of our cultural, social and economic systems will be required in order to put humanity onto a new, sustainable path. It is a question exactly how our population of almost 7 billion people can transform itself and strike an enduring, dynamic balance within the biosphere. And yet human beings have proven themselves to have remarkable ingenuity when forced into a corner. If we look widely across the world, some of the changes that are already afoot in the realms of government, business, economy, culture, cities and individual lifestyles are inspiring. Moving forward, we will need all of the wisdom and humility that can be mustered in order to construct a viable vision of the future to which everyone can relate. Simultaneously, we will need to have adequate feedback loops that alert us to the benefits and perils of all individual and collective actions. For me, Auntie Bessie provides a good model – always moving forward, always conscious of her past, always humble in the presence of what can't be fully known or controlled. We can take heart in the fact that, despite the resistance to change that seems hardwired in human beings, there are also 'tipping points' which, when reached, can dissolve resistance and precipitate sea-changes capable of changing the very rules of this thing called life.

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