

Cultural Brief presented to the City of Montreal February 11, 2005
as part of the development process for the new Culture Policy.

BACKGROUND — ELAN (ENGLISH LANGUAGE ARTS NETWORK)

Montreal is one of the world's major French-speaking cities. It is also home to a large and active population of English-speaking artists that is stimulated by the city's dynamic cultural environment. The vast majority of English-speaking artists live in and around the Metropolis. Therefore they have a vested interest in actively participating in Montreal's development.

English-speaking artists are not always recognized at home until they've been acclaimed elsewhere. David Solway, who won the 2004 Grand Prix du livre de Montréal, is a notable exception. Another poet, Anne Carson, who won the Canadian Giller Prize for poetry and the prestigious American MacArthur "Genius" Award (worth US\$500,000!), is much better known in the US than in Montreal. For decades the English music scene in Montreal has been vibrant but low profile. However, in January 2005, both *Spin* magazine and the *New York Times* proclaimed Montreal as the "Next Big Scene" because of its English-speaking bands, who constitute the most explosive hot-bed of musical creativity on the face of the planet. Possibly a slight exaggeration, but these musicians have certainly added to Montreal's reputation as a world renowned cultural Capital. Theatre and Dance and the Visual Arts also boast renowned colleagues.

The English-speaking artists have recently formed an artists' network called ELAN (the English Language Arts Network. www.quebec-elan.org) which represents writers, publishers, musicians, actors, filmmakers, dancers, visual and media artists. ELAN unites the forces of several hundred individual artists as well as the major English-language artists' associations: QWF (Quebec Writers' Federation), QDF (Quebec Drama Federation), AELAQ (Association des éditeurs de langue anglaise du Québec) and the new English-language Film/TV Council of Quebec.

ELAN is a meeting place for Quebec artists who use English as their first language. Although most members are comfortable in both official languages, and have chosen Quebec as their home because they value its cultural richness, ELAN celebrates and promotes that part of our identity which is rooted in the English language. ELAN also provides a forum to make common cause with the French-speaking community and our francophone colleagues by bringing together English-language artists from all disciplines and all parts of the province to forge new alliances, build new audiences and seek new sources of support.

GENERAL OBSERVATIONS

The Cultural Development Policy document recognizes culture as a key vehicle for development, economic vitality and future prosperity. This sort of economic discourse is uncomfortable for most artists who value the intrinsic qualities of art, preferring to work at their art rather than man the barricades, although they can be rallied around declarations such as "Culture is at the heart of Montreal's identity, history and social cohesion."

The major problem with the policy document is that it tries to be all things to all people, with little of indication of priorities. The truest statement in the document is that it "all rests on the cooperation of all players. Indeed, only such co-operation can secure the successful implementation of a cultural policy."

In our view, a successful (and useful) cultural policy will require two things. First is a clear statement of timelines and priorities. Clearly, given the limited financial resources available, the long-neglected library system is not going to be upgraded to an acceptable level overnight. Nor will a campaign to encourage more frequent attendance of the arts, by adults or youth, have an immediate impact. Nor will major infrastructure programs be implemented in the short term. It would be a grave mistake to invest all the city's resources in one area while neglecting many others that are essential to the arts. For example, it would have a disastrous effect to devote a decade to building culture industries, which are major tourist attractions and engines of development, while starving the myriads of artists who operate on a more modest, but often more creative level.

To balance all of these competing interests, the city must establish priorities. Trying to meet all needs at once would mean doing nothing. Limited funds would be spread so thin that they would have no impact in any given area. The city needs a 10–20 year plan which focuses special emphasis on one critical area at a time. For example, libraries could be a priority for 5 years, followed by campaigns to encourage cultural consumption for 5 years, followed by redevelopment of facilities for 5 years, etc. Of course, such long-term vision is not the usual approach for either politicians or artists. But without vision and self-discipline we remain stuck in an underfunded system unable to effect significant change.

The policy rightly recognizes that cooperation between all players is essential. This is where the city can play an active and useful role. The creation of consultative committees made up of artists is a laudable initiative. However this system has the flaw of being ad hoc and not officially representative of the larger artistic community. Each artistic sector and discipline has its own artists' association.

(i.e., CQT, RAAV, CQM, RQD, etc.) These associations are representative of their members and each speaks with authority on behalf of a large group of artists. It is a well known fact that when individual artists sit on councils and boards they do so as volunteers, at a personal cost of time and energy. For them to effectively represent their discipline would require dialogue with their peers about proposed policies, turning their volunteer contribution into a full-time (unpaid) job. This is unrealistic and so the committees tend to become closed systems that do not connect with the larger artistic community. To truly innovate in this area, CAM must find a way to include the official artists' associations in each consultative committee so that their paid staff can maintain an open dialogue with their membership about proposed policies and priorities. Open access and public distribution of consultative committee documents will contribute to greater dialogue and transparency. CAM could establish a model that could subsequently be exported to CALQ and Canada Council.

PRIORITIES OF ELAN MEMBERS

1. Our members all require access to affordable spaces — rehearsal, storage, artists' studios and administration. Gentrification of the city, while good for economic development, often results in artists being evicted from old industrial spaces. The city must be careful in the development of cultural poles to ensure that they do not unwittingly exclude the artists they intended to encourage. The same danger applies to overemphasizing the big, splashy cultural industries. Trying to turn Montreal into Broadway North can be detrimental to the many lower profile theatre companies, musicians, dance troupes, visual artists and writers that flourish here.
2. English-speaking artists recognize and celebrate Montreal as a predominantly French-speaking city. We appreciate the city's efforts to make documents available in English and encourage the city to value and welcome the inter-cultural communities. One specific problem faced by English-speaking artists is the cost of translating grant applications, briefs, etc. into French. Is there some way the city can help to alleviate this financial burden?
3. The city's priority in the short term should be to make the most of the arts and culture that exist now. All artists' associations and many individual artists have websites. The city can do a great deal to promote links between artists and cultural consumers. For example, ELAN is in the process of creating an Events Calendar which will promote all art produced by its members: visual arts, dance, music, theatre, literature, etc. This information will be of interest to the local population as well as English-speaking tourists. The city could play an active role in advertising and promoting such websites, which serve to maximize the impact of the culture that is currently available.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

- The cultural policy must clearly state timelines and priorities
- The City must ensure that all consultative committees are primarily composed of practicing artists who are recommended by the larger artistic community.

- The City must create and/or provide affordable and central spaces which can be used by the artists for the purpose of creation.
- The City must consult with the artists before creating a quartier de spectacles — many have been displaced already and have been forced to find spaces far outside the cultural centre of the city. Preparation of a map of where artists are currently housed in the downtown core is far too late, as many have already been forced out. This map will not reflect the reality of two years ago.
- The City must provide methods for affordable access to translation services.
- The City must ensure that existing information services are linked and interconnected so as not to duplicate work
- The City bureaucrats and politicians must buy into this policy and not just pay it lip service. All levels of government must understand that culture is not a luxury, but rather a fundamental part of daily living
- As such it must be totally integrated into the educational system, and not marginalized as it is currently becoming. Culture is not an extracurricular activity — it is the fundamental basics of all subjects.
- Tax credits need to be put in place in order to encourage and promote the support of culture by the corporate and business sectors.
- The City must find ways to enforce and encourage the media to support and nurture culture in all its elements and activities.

ELAN applauds the city for undertaking the ambitious initiative of creating a cultural policy. We look forward to being an active participant in future discussions as the policy evolves and is put into effect.

The English Language Arts Network