

**From Queen Street to Queen's Park –
The Word On The Street And Festival Culture In Toronto**

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Executive Summary

The early twenty-first century has been a testing time for the City of Toronto. Coping with the massive physical growth of the city through its amalgamation, which occurred at the end of the last century, the enlarged city spent its early years struggling to find its own identity. In an effort to ensure that its economic and competitive growth worked to reinforce the goal of much needed urban identity formation, Toronto branded itself a ‘cultural capital’ with the release of its 2003 *Culture Plan*. This plan would significantly alter both how the city, as a collective, perceives itself and how citizens and visitors interact with the city and its public spaces.

While the *Culture Plan* did not specifically identify festivals as a focal point of Toronto’s cultural development, six years after the plan’s release, it is clear that they have come to the fore of the city’s cultural industry. The Word on the Street Book and Magazine Festival is a particularly useful case study in understanding the growing importance of festivals as cultural institutions in Toronto. This particular festival predates the *Culture Plan* by more than a decade, suggesting that Toronto’s close connection to festival culture extends well beyond its attempt to establish itself as a cultural capital. Furthermore, its growth over the past half-decade, which necessitated that the festival move to a significantly larger venue, well illustrates how Toronto’s festivals have grown in both stature and importance in recent years.

The major findings of this report are:

- Festivals have come to serve cultural and economic functions in the city.
- The Word on the Street has actively searched for ways to situate its exhibits within the context of Toronto’s historic, ethnic, and contemporary cultures.
- Festivals reappropriated public spaces, which allow festivalgoers and festival exhibits to interact uniquely with urban settings.
- Festivals such as Word on the Street have democratized culture by making it more available and accessible for public consumption
- Festival growth has contributed towards improving global perceptions of Toronto as a cultural capital.
- The City itself needs to do more from a financial perspective to champion the city’s culture. This is because it remains too dependent on contributions from other, typically private sources

The growth of the Word on the Street forms an important narrative about how festivals have developed and become central facets of Toronto’s cultural development. By moving the festival from Queen Street to Queen’s Park, Word on the Street has grown tremendously. No longer constrained by the boundaries of a narrow roadway, the festival is now more sprawling, more accessible, and better able to represent the full spectrum of the city’s diversity. Now prominently housed in one of the City’s most central and historic neighbourhoods, attendance has risen accordingly.

One of the reasons why festivals such as Word on the Street have become prominent cultural devices is their ability to democratize culture. At the festival, culture is easy to access and typically free. Moreover, by situating festivals within the city's spaces, the culture that is being developed becomes uniquely Torontonians. Nevertheless, questions abound about these festivals. For instance, have city planners invoked the notion of culture expediently? Has the City of Toronto done enough to grow culture? Is festival culture sufficient or, should the city be looking to expand beyond festivals to turn Toronto into a cultural capital? This report explores and provides answers to these questions.

From Queen Street to Queen's Park – The Word On The Street And Festival Culture In Toronto

Michael Bowmile



Source: Bowmile (2008)

Unlike Nuit Blanche (Scotiabank) or Luminato (L'Oreal), the naming rights to the WOTS have not been pawned off to a corporate entity.

Introduction

Can Toronto be considered an international, cosmopolitan, cultural capital alongside the likes of Paris, Amsterdam, or New York? In recent years, Toronto's municipal government has undertaken initiatives to enhance culture within the city to achieve this status. Capitalizing on Toronto's diversity, gentrification, multiculturalism, and existing cultural institutions, the municipal government revealed a plan in 2003 outlining how Toronto's culturalization should unfold. This plan encompassed a 63-step process to guide Toronto in developing new cultural

exhibitions and institutions, and building upon existing ones. In practice, this has resulted in the City forming partnerships with both the federal and provincial governments along with the private sector to fund and promote these initiatives. The plan is underscored by ongoing attempts to establish Toronto as, what city planners call, an ‘international cultural capital.’

One of the most effective and arguably unintended aspects of this plan has been the growth of Toronto’s festival scene. Already boasting an internationally acclaimed film festival, fringe festival, jazz festival, and annual Caribana and Gay Pride parades, each of these events have recently increased in both scope and status. Through these existing festivals, along with the emergence of other internationally and locally celebrated ones, the festival has become a central institution through which the city champions diversity, and develops and enhances culture. The festival has resultantly come to the forefront of Toronto’s cultural development.

Festivals have proven to be particularly effective at broadening culture’s scope by making it more affordable and accessible to the public. These events offer the public new and diverse opportunities to experience and interact with culture that would otherwise not be available. They have simultaneously helped to strengthen public bonds through the development of a cultural commons. The commons fosters interaction with both culture and people within the city’s public spaces. For these reasons, both the festival and related festival culture have played important roles in defining Toronto as a cultural capital.

Held annually since 1990, the Word on the Street (WOTS) book and magazine festival is one of the longest running, highly attended and most successful festivals in the city. The WOTS festival

will serve as the focus of this report, and the discussion that follows will display how WOTS has firmly embedded itself within the city's multiethnic, cultural, and festival narratives.

Furthermore, this report will suggest that, given its longevity, the WOTS can be considered a precursor to Toronto's festivalization -- a process by which festivals have become a fundamental aspect of Toronto's culture and cultural development.

Aims and goals of the case study

The purpose of this report is to explore the WOTS festival as a case study to understand the role festivals have played in developing and democratizing culture in Toronto. This exploration will reveal how culture is developed, transmitted, and disseminated by the public. WOTS is a particularly prescient case study in the context of Toronto's subsequent festivalization because it is an inclusive event that represents the spectrum of the Greater Toronto Area's various identities and cultures. Its exhibits and activities are developed to appeal to citizens of different ages, backgrounds, and ethnicities. Consequently, understanding WOTS, its uses of the public space and its impact on the city's culturalization and economy also offers important insights into how and why Toronto has started to evolve as a cultural capital. The structure of the report follows.

First, it discusses the festival's physical layout and infrastructure. This section displays how the recent move from Queen Street West to Queen's Park has dramatically altered WOTS's spatiality, developing new possibilities for cultural and economic exchanges and interactions. It also assesses ways in which WOTS engages both the public and private realms and measures the commercial impacts of WOTS. Second, it explores the notion of the democratization of culture, demonstrating that this process is a direct and deliberate result of Toronto's culturalization and

subsequent festivalization. This section suggests that WOTS democratizes culture because it has woven itself into Toronto's social fabric by appropriating an important part of Toronto's city space for citizens to access and engage in cultural events. In the third section, the report examines WOTS through the lens of the City of Toronto's 2003 *Culture Plan* and the subsequent 2008 *Progress Report*. This section evaluates the festival within the broader context of Toronto's attempts to establish itself as a global cultural capital. The conclusion offers some other insights about the WOTS festival: how it engages the city, some of its shortcomings, and some of its overarching successes.

Some words from the park

Within the context of Toronto's *Culture Plan*, perhaps the most notable aspect of the 2004 move from Queen Street West to Queen's Park is that the Word on the Street festival is now situated directly on Toronto's 'Avenue of the Arts.' This permits WOTS to fit firmly within Toronto's cultural narrative as its location lies in the heart of the city's cultural nucleus. When on the festival grounds, observers are steps from the Royal Ontario Museum (ROM), Art Gallery of Ontario (AGO) and in clear view of the McLaughlin Planetarium. This location also makes it easily accessible by public transit, with subway stations at both the north (Bloor) and south (College) entrances of Queen's Park.

The festival runs along Queen's Park Crescent East and West, which turns into University Avenue upon converging at College Street, from Bloor Street, south to Wellesley Street West. Queen's Park Crescent is closed to vehicular traffic for the duration of the festival to permit tents for vendors, publishers, authors, and interest groups to display their products or sell their wares.

Since Queen's Park Boulevard splits just south of Charles Street, a logical, circular flow for patrons to follow around the festival grounds is created. This reduces congestion, eliminates safety concerns brought about by motorists or overcrowded areas, and makes it relatively simple to manoeuvre throughout the fairgrounds -- all common problems at street festivals.



Source: wordlit.ca (2008)

Map of the grounds. Note that this layout permits patrons to either follow its natural circular flow or use one of the many paths to easily access preferable vendors or events¹

Given its urban location, the Queen's Park setting is particularly unique since it contains a large, spacious green area in the interior, providing a reprieve from the urban setting of the festival's exterior. The middle of the festival grounds serves a number of purposes. It contains numerous tents and stages featuring public readings, performances, panel discussions, author signings, various cultural activities, and even a reader's lounge.



Source: Bowmile (2008)

Tables set up near food vendor area offering patrons an opportunity to sit while enjoying their meal.

This green space also allows for the placement of tables and picnic benches at the south end of the grounds where most food vendors are located. Additionally, it provides the space necessary for corporate sponsors TV Ontario, Eye Weekly, and Citytv to set up large stages for musical and theatrical performances. Large green spaces remain open for the public to determine their own uses. This provides quieter areas for families to picnic at or readers to peruse books and magazines purchased at the festival.



Source: Bowmile (2008)

Picture taken near Wellesley Street West: note the urban-parkland dichotomization and their differing uses of urban/public spaces.

Tents, exhibits, and dialogues at WOTS

The tents throughout the green area serve a number of purposes, catering to a diverse set of interests. For example, at the 2008 festival the ‘Bestsellers stage’ featured book readings by internationally acclaimed authors such as Austin Clarke and local celebrities like former Toronto Maple Leaf goaltender Johnny Bower, while the ‘City of Toronto’ tent presented local talent and books that were topically relevant to the city. Other tents offered children’s activities or catered to specific topical interests such as the ‘Comics and Graphic Novels’ tent. These exhibits provide spectators with direct access to the actual sources of culture -- the authors and performers. This arrangement allows for interactions between the public and the sources of culture, benefiting

authors and performers by providing them with an audience, as well as benefiting the public by making cultural productions more accessible. Thus, the tents and exhibits serve an interactive function as locations where the festival's patrons can be both spectators and consumers. At these exhibits, patrons can view performances, talk with authors, and learn about contemporary literature produced internationally, nationally, and throughout Toronto.

Through several of its exhibits, the WOTS festival connects itself intrinsically to ongoing narratives and issues specifically relevant to the city of Toronto. In 2008, this was especially evident at the 'City of Toronto,' and 'Diaspora Dialogues' tents. The 'City of Toronto' tent featured book readings by the nominees for the 2008 Toronto Book Award, an award presented annually to an author who has produced a book or piece of literature judged evocative of the city (City of Toronto, 2009). This allows the festival to feature local authors and works that are topically relevant to the city. By prominently presenting works and authors that focus on Toronto and its ongoing themes, conflicts, experiences or events, the patron's experience at the festival becomes inherently Toronto-centric.

Taking the city's ongoing culturalization into account, the most interesting stage featured at the 2008 WOTS was the 'Diaspora Dialogues' tent. According to the *What's On* section of the Word on the Street website, this tent "put[s] the spotlight on Toronto neighbourhoods through readings, music, spoken word and other segments that reflect the complexity of our metropolis," (Word on the Street, 2009). Delineating the acts by the city's neighbourhoods -- the Annex, the West End, the Beaches, north of Steeles, and Hogtown -- both characterizes and reveals Toronto's multiethnic character and the multiple dimensions of culture.



Source: Bowmile (2008)

The Diaspora Dialogues Tent placing Toronto's diversity on display.

The 'Diaspora Dialogues' exhibit was also the most provocative at the 2008 festival. Since the 1998 amalgamation of the six municipalities which had comprised Metropolitan Toronto, Toronto has struggled to form an identity because of a number of disconnects throughout the city. These include dichotomies between urban-suburban and high income-low income areas, and the existence of pockets of ethnic communities throughout the city's downtown, eastern, and western areas (Veronis, 2006: 1657). While this has not necessarily resulted in class conflict or excessive tensions, it has made it difficult to form a unified identity.

The 'Diaspora Dialogues' tent helps to bridge this gap. At the tent, each of the performances directly related to daily life in one of the abovementioned areas. By sectionalizing the city, this

exhibit displays Toronto's differentiation as something that harvests inclusiveness through difference. WOTS therefore serves as a public forum, which brings differences together and celebrates them, underscoring an oddly inclusive and uniquely Torontonians common culture of difference

Private sector support

WOTS also reflects Toronto's consumer culture. The exterior sections of the festival along Queen's Park Boulevard resemble a marketplace, with myriad authors, book sellers, stores and publishers (large and small) selling an assortment of books and magazine subscriptions. WOTS offers individuals and businesses commercial opportunities by exposing goods to a large number of prospective consumers. Conversely, this marketplace provides consumers with both opportunities to interact with publishers and access to a large number of books and publications they would not have without the festival. Many of the vendors I observed accepted credit and debit cards, while portable ATMs were set up throughout the grounds to ensure commercial activity. As one vendor mentioned, "100,000 people are out looking at books; it's a great thing."

The marketplace accentuates the double cultural-consumer benefit of the WOTS festival. On the one hand, it promotes consumerism and stimulates economic activity for both large and small businesses, while on the other; it places literacy, reading, knowledge, and human interaction at the forefront. Thus, the festival promotes business opportunism and contributes positively to the public good by focusing on important aspects of human development and social interaction.

One upshot of its expanding size has been the need for WOTS to maintain a strong corporate presence. The Toronto Star featured prominently at the entrance of the festival where it provided general information about WOTS and maps of the festival ground. While the signage at the main entrance off Bloor Street did not contain any corporate logos, slogans, or brands, Sylvan Learning Centres sponsored the shirts worn by the volunteer staff. Corporate entities such as TV Ontario, Citytv, and OMNI Television sponsored many of the tents and stages. Moreover, large corporations such as the Toronto Transit Commission, the *Toronto Star*, the *National Post*, and *Readers Digest* had exhibits throughout the festival grounds where they advertised or sold subscriptions to their products. Clearly, as the festival has grown in size and stature, it has required the penetration of private capital to ensure its sustained growth.

As with any large public gathering, WOTS offers groups and individuals opportunities to promote various social causes and upcoming public events. A number of handouts and giveaways were offered throughout the grounds to raise awareness about a multitude of issues and events. Heavily funded and well known entities such as the Toronto District School Board, the United Jewish Appeal and Amnesty International set up tables to raise either money or awareness for their various causes. A brief examination of some of the handouts picked up throughout the day reveals that smaller, lesser-known businesses, groups, and movements can also capitalize on the mass exposure WOTS provides. For example, handouts included advertisements for the Metro Toronto Movement for Literacy, alternative news website rabble.ca, and local publisher Green Dragon Press. WOTS consequently contains a strong corporate and brand presence, but it also importantly provides extensive publicity to lesser known and typically marginalized businesses, groups and causes.

WOTS moves to Queen's Park

In 2004, WOTS moved from its historical location on Queen Street West to its current habitat in front of the provincial legislature in Queen's Park.² The main upshot of this move was the spectaclization of the festival by providing the space required to accommodate more large-scale exhibits, and larger crowds. The move also allowed WOTS to evolve into something more closely resembling a traditional festival. This significantly altered the ambience of the event, resulting in a more festive atmosphere. While WOTS was once confined to asphalt and cement sidewalks with clear start and end points, the move has allowed it to become a central locale with numerous meeting points that patrons can easily move between to view the exhibits of their choosing. This has been particularly conducive to making the festival a more family-friendly event.

The move to Queen's Park has made the festival safer, more accessible, and more amenable to families because it is easier to navigate and has the space for spectacles more likely to capture the attention and imagination of younger audiences. Consequently, exhibits and activities for families and children are becoming increasingly prevalent. At the 2008 festival, the west side of the festival grounds from Queen's Park Crescent West into the central green space was designated as 'KidStreet' and featured numerous exhibits for families and children. These included the TVOKids performance stage, the 'Anne of Green Gables activity centre,' a Children's reading tent, and a Children's activity tent. Booths set up on the exterior along 'KidStreet' sold children's and adolescent's books and publications. Underscoring the success of the initiative to make WOTS a family event, the 'KidStreet' section appeared to be one of the most densely populated areas on the grounds in 2008.

For the 2009 festival, organizers plan to increase the accessibility, spectre, and importance of the children's exhibits. According to festival director Cindy Goldrick's monthly newsletter, the 2009 WOTS will feature a 'KidStreet Activity Guide,' highlighting both the events and venues for the festival's family activities. This guide will allow younger patrons and their parents to more easily identify and connect with the festival's family exhibits (Goldrick, email newsletter, June 22, 2009). This emphasis on children reflects the WOTS's central mandate to "foster the awareness and appreciation of the written word in our culture [...] and champion literacy as an essential element of a healthy community" (Word on the Street, 2009). Connecting young citizens to WOTS is likely to be one of the most effective ways of achieving these goals. They are the most impressionable citizens, and in this internet and television age, the segment of the population most urgently requiring a connection to the written word (Mackey, 2001: 167-68). Large-scale spectacles at WOTS attract children and adolescents to the events on the festival grounds where their attendance exposes them to an assortment of age-appropriate literature. Thus, with the capacity to spotlight family exhibits, the move to Queen's Park has helped organizers entrench the aforementioned values within the festival's fabric while also creating a more diverse and inclusive event.

The logistics and infrastructure

From an organizational standpoint, the formation and growth of the festival is largely the result of an emphasis on the local. Exhibitors, sponsors, volunteers, and even performers can apply to participate in the festival through the WOTS website (Goldrick, email newsletter, May 22, 2009). While applicants are screened, space is available for diverse actors and interests to

become involved. This suggests that WOTS is not a monolithic event -- it provides opportunities for people from all backgrounds, cultures, or ethnicities to get involved in several capacities. This reflects the nature of the festival, and its attempts to create bonds or connections between Toronto's various and sometimes-conflicting interests through initiatives such as the aforementioned 'KidStreet' and 'Diaspora Dialogues' tent.

WOTS relies on a combination of local, national, and international sponsorships and donations to ensure sufficient funding for the annual event. The *Support the Festival* page on the Word on the Street Website illustrates the methods through which organizers procure funding. Private citizens can make tax-deductible charitable donations directly to WOTS. Furthermore, businesses can apply to advertise on the festival grounds, on the WOTS website, and in the festival program and 'KidStreet Activity Guide,' both of which will be distributed at the 2009 festival (Word on the Street, 2009). As the website illustrates, sponsorships can provide significant exposure. With over 200,000 attendees at the event, there is large-scale circulation of the festival programs in addition to considerable traffic on the WOTS website.

Festival organizers have also successfully utilized the accessibility and exposure the internet provides to spread information about the festival and keep festival enthusiasts updated. The festival has a Facebook group with over 1000 members, as well as a Twitter account with hundreds of followers. The festival's director, Cindy Goldrick, also circulates a monthly newsletter, 'The Latest Word,' through email. This newsletter contains information about the year's upcoming festival including author appearances, new initiatives undertaken by organizers, and new venues and events that patrons can expect at the next WOTS. These communication

options have helped organizers disseminate information about the festival to the general public, and increase the festival's exposure, turning it into more than a one-day event. This has increased the stature of the WOTS because it provides it with a constant, perennial presence.

The website and recent newsletters also reveal how the festival continues to modernize and integrate itself within Toronto's contemporary culture. For example, during Toronto's 2009 Pride Week, WOTS organizers sponsored 'The Proud Voices Reading Series,' featuring literary readings by members of Toronto's queer literature community (Goldrick, email newsletter, June 22, 2009). Furthermore, in response to the financial uncertainty resulting from the current recession, it has been announced that the 2009 festival will contain a 'Money Matters Tent.' This exhibit will feature financial advisors and business pundits, who will offer financial advice and answer audience questions pertaining to various financial matters (Ibid.).

This illustrates how the festival is organized and how it has developed. WOTS responds to contemporary challenges and issues, while seeking new ways of attaching itself to and establishing itself within the fabric of Toronto's culture. WOTS is an indigenous event that relies heavily on community involvement, and attempts to mount exhibits that are reflective of the host city. However, there are concerns both over who is attending the event and around developing ways for planners to attract new and more diverse crowds.

But just who is going?

WOTS has grown tremendously in both size and stature since its inauguration in 1990. However, this growth is not exclusive to WOTS; it is in fact typical of the sum of cultural events held

throughout Toronto. As a recent report by the City indicates, city-funded culture events, which include “performances, readings, touring performances; exhibitions, film, video and media screenings, community arts projects, artists’ talks or artist in resident talks, lectures, classes, workshops seminars, conferences, outreach and other public activities,” have increased in both overall attendance and the number of events by over twenty-percent since the City unveiled its *Culture Plan* in 2003 (see Table 1.1 and Table 1.2) (City of Toronto 2008: 15).

This trend is well demonstrated by WOTS, which has seen attendance increase substantially in recent years, from 150,000 in 2001 to 210,000 in 2007 (Word on the Street, 2009).

Consequently, there appears to be a correlation between the growth of Toronto’s cultural industries, the advancement of festivals, and increasing attendance at events such as WOTS. This indicates that public events such as festivals are increasingly at the forefront of Toronto’s ‘cultural renaissance.’

TABLE 1.1

Estimated Attendance at City-funded Culture Events

		Year 1	Year 2	Year 3
2002	2003	2004	2005	2006
8,998,407	9,406,987	11,348,057	12,001,827	11,589,280

Source: City of Toronto (2008). *Culture Plan Progress Report II* (p. 15)

TABLE 1.2

Estimated Number of City-funded Culture Events

		Year 1	Year 2	Year 3
2002	2003	2004	2005	2006
16,814	18,431	20,146	19,554	24,811

Source: City of Toronto (2008). *Culture Plan Progress Report II* (p. 15)

The festival and democratizing culture in Toronto

The most notable result of Toronto's culturalization and festivalization has come as a consequence of the desire to push culture outside the boundaries of its traditional environment. As the WOTS festival illustrates, culture is no longer only bound up inside the walls of traditional institutions such as museums and art galleries. Instead, through festivals culture has been fused into the public sphere and placed within the public space. The shift, which serves a liberating function by making culture more visible and accessible, has occurred for a variety of reasons, many of which are outlined by cultural analyst George Yudice in *The Expediency of Culture*. Yudice (2003: 29) argues that culture has become expedient through its appropriation by neoliberalism "as a resource for attaining an end." Thus, culture is wielded "for both sociopolitical and economic amelioration, that is, for increasing participation in this era of waning political involvement, conflicts over citizenship [...] and the rise of [...] 'cultural capitalism'" (Ibid.: 9). In more accessible language, culture becomes expedient because, no longer on the sociopolitical margin, it has become a public policy device used to develop social capital and to achieve other social and economic goals. Yudice's expediency argument is illustrative of WOTS, which has fostered a common culture while simultaneously stimulating commercial activity.

Culture's ability to connect with citizens is perhaps the most important aspect of this expediency. As Simon Miles (2005) notes, there is an important link between cultural, personal, and societal development:

[There] is a significance of place for our culture and, in turn, significance [...] for the sustainability of the process of our development as individuals and as members of society. [Thus, culture] has to enrich our lives, it has to be sustainable, it has to connect us with our past, and it has to respond to our present and our foreseeable future (70).

In this analysis, culture becomes an important aspect of development at the level of the individual and serves a societal regenerative function by allowing for the reproduction of social connectivity through personal enrichment. This demonstrates culture as being expedient for two reasons: it is an attractive commodity to sell to citizens and it promotes both creativity and innovativeness throughout society. Culture therefore becomes a conduit for social development by connecting with the atomic citizen and promoting societal resourcefulness, creativity, and connectivity.

Why culture matters

In an epoch of revitalized civic engagement, festival culture has also been employed as an agent for social involvement that theoretically strengthens the social fabric by engaging ‘the many.’ The development of cultural industries is presumed to yield net social and economic benefits, making it politically sensible to engage the public with culture through the growth of cultural industry.³ In fact, research suggests that this is specifically what the public wants: local citizens and international tourists alike seek destinations that offer cultural events and institutions (Yudice 2003: 167). This makes Toronto’s approach to promoting culture through the festival particularly prudent.

What specifically attracts city goers to these events is the opportunity they provide to engage in the extraordinary. Festivals are typically inclusive “event[s] that showcases key symbols and commonly held values, thereby strengthening group cohesion,” while offering “a break in daily routine [...] that serves as a safety valve to relieve daily tensions associated with life” (Ballerino Cohen, 1998: 190-91). Toronto’s festivals aim to produce and reproduce mass civic gatherings and engagements by removing citizens from the rigors of normality and allowing for the reclamation of public space (Richards, 2007: 268). Festivals without restrictive entrance fees, like WOTS, therefore provide a temporal, public landscape in which the average citizen can enter and connect with culture.

This allows these festivals to serve a democratizing function. Culture is no longer appropriated by aristocratic or cultural elites, but is instead offered to the general public. At the festival, everybody can partake in their own cultural experience, uninhibited by costs, private restraints, or personal inhibition. Culture becomes socially omnipresent; it is available for mass consumption. Consequently, through the festival, culture has become a popular form of entertainment by providing opportunities for participation.

The City’s Culture Plan

Throughout its recent history, Toronto has struggled to forge a unifying, inclusive identity. Writing in the years following the City’s 1998 amalgamation, urban specialists Stefan Kipfer and Roger Keil (2000: 32) note that “[t]he emerging metropolitan planning vision [speaks] to the language of urban reform. Public space, vibrant neighbourhoods, street life, [and] public transit

[...] inform the current planning vocabulary.” They also note the deliberate attempts by city planners to reclaim and redefine public spaces. This has occurred through initiatives such as the construction of a public square at Yonge and Dundas Streets, as well as explicit attempts to develop Toronto as a competitive international city (Ibid.: 33). By the early 2000s, city planners had therefore started to conceptualize ways of branding or rebranding the City of Toronto.

In 2003, the municipal government unveiled its *Culture Plan for the Creative City*. This document comprised a comprehensive 63-point plan which endeavoured to set a foundation for how Toronto should “use its arts, culture and heritage assets to position itself as a Creative City, a global cultural capital” (City of Toronto, 2003: 1). Citing internationally acclaimed urban expert Richard Florida, the plan states “vibrant and diverse Canadian cities attract knowledge workers more easily than cities with a different profile [...] arts and culture, ethnic diversity and cultural openness act as magnets to draw high-technology industries and spur economic growth. In sum: a lively culture and a lively economy are an equation” (Ibid.: 8). The plan underscored the City’s need to emphasize its culture and heritage in order to establish itself as a competitor within the global economy (Jenkins, 2005: 176). It is also demonstrative of an attempt by Toronto to brand itself as a creative and cultural city in an effort to be considered as a global cultural centre.

The plan made numerous recommendations for improving Toronto’s existing cultural institutions and constructing new ones. It also discussed uses of public spaces and how Toronto’s cityscape could be integrated into the cultural plan. For example, it recommended reinterpreting and naming a stretch of University Avenue as the ‘Avenue of the Arts.’ University Avenue is one of

the city's main corridors, stretching from the provincial legislature on Bloor Street south to Union Station, Toronto's main train terminal, on Front Street. Several of Toronto's notable cultural institutions happen to be located on or near University Avenue between Bloor and Dundas Streets, including: the Royal Ontario Museum, Toronto's Opera House and the Art Gallery of Ontario.

As mentioned, the northern portion of University Avenue also serves as the current venue for WOTS. This suggests the possibility that the city along with WOTS planners have attempted to integrate the festival within the broader context of Toronto's culturalization. WOTS has become demonstrative of the different and innovative ways of enhancing culture in Toronto outside of the traditional conduits of culture. More importantly, by situating the festival along the 'Avenue of the Arts,' WOTS has become both a product of and contributor towards the process of cultural development as set forth by the *Culture Plan*.

According to Barbara Jenkins (2005: 169), the preliminary upshot of the *Culture Plan* resulted mostly in developments and improvements to the city's traditional cultural institutions. Thus, by 2005, Toronto's culturalization could largely be measured by examining the city's changing skyline as museum and institutional development were at the fore of the *Culture Plan*. Jenkins points out that development occurred because of funding made available by both federal and provincial governments, especially following the release of the *Culture Plan* (Ibid.: 175-81).

However, she also argues that this development lacks foresight for two reasons. First, cash injections from federal and provincial governments are short-term payments that do not consider

long-term operating costs. Importantly, she points out that current operating funds for Toronto's cultural organizations from all levels of government are below pre-1990 levels, despite the substantial growth in Toronto's economy. This, Jenkins believes, will eventually result in increased reliance on the private sphere to cover operating costs (Ibid.: 182). Secondly, using buildings as marketing ploys serves a novelty function and only work as such "until someone builds an even flashier building" elsewhere (Ibid.: 183). In sum, Jenkins recognizes the advancement of what she terms 'Toronto's Cultural Renaissance,' but notes a number of potential drawbacks and pitfalls with its implementation. Absent from her analysis is any mention of Toronto's festivals. In sum, she fails to note the importance of Toronto's festivalization, despite its fundamental impact on this cultural 'renaissance.' The report will now focus on festivals and on how festivals have prevailed as primary cultural outlets for the inhabitants of Toronto.

The triumph of the modern idea of the festival

The contemporary growth of the festival is not exclusive to Toronto but is, in fact, a global phenomenon. As Erik Hitters (2007: 281-94) purposively explains, the process of festivalization has become a central urban cultural policy throughout Europe where large-scale festivals are used to turn relatively small cities such as Rotterdam and Porto into regional cultural capitals. This process satisfies the demand for rituals and, more recently, spectacles (Richards 2007: 260-61). Festivals have proven to be attractive cultural conduits by allowing for the production of "culture 'spontaneously' in public spaces [...] contributing to the 'atmosphere' of the city [...] [while] the 'local' becomes important in determining cultural experience" (Ibid.: 273). Unlike museums, which typically house globally produced art, at festivals, local elements and

interactions are inevitable and essential aspects. The festival can thus play a defining role in the context of a city since it exists temporally and within existing urban spaces. This is clearly demonstrative of WOTS's relationship to Toronto and its culture-seeking citizens.

Festivals have consequently proven to be effective at advancing new conceptions of culture. In *Economic Impact and Social Performance of Cultural Macroeconomics*, Herrero et al (2007: 305) argue, "culture has shifted from being exclusively a realm of consumption and individual pleasure to representing a factor of economic development and social cohesion." This is best evidenced by global increases in the size, scope, and number of festivals. As the authors note, large-scale festivals are increasingly playing key economic and social functions within cities, "since they can attract large audiences, help create new urban images, stimulate creativity, and build social cohesion" (Ibid.). As a result, politicians worldwide are coming to believe that festivals can increase a city's international stature and simultaneously create possibilities for investment, business opportunities, and cultural creativity (Klaic, 2007: 57). This indicates that festivals are now recognized as important cultural institutions by the very people who set cultural policies, in turn allowing for the growth and development of an array of festivals.

The growing acceptance of festivals as a source for Toronto's cultural development is represented in the City's 2008 *Culture Plan Progress Report II*. In this report, Toronto's cultural planners examine where the 2003 *Culture Plan* succeeded and where shortcomings in cultural development continue to exist. As the *Progress Report* notes, one of the most significant achievements of the culture plan, Live with Culture, "came about because of the community consultations that were put in place for the development of the *Culture Plan* in early 2002" (City

of Toronto, 2008: 8). The Live with Culture initiative resulted in the 2006 emergence of the now annual *Nuit Blanche* contemporary art festival. When considered alongside the start of the *Luminato* arts and creativity festival, the growth of WOTS, and the explosion of other ethnic- and arts-based festivals including *A Taste of the Danforth*, *Summerlicious*, *Winterlicious*, and the Toronto International Film Festival (TIFF), the triumph of the festival is clearly evidenced. Even though festivals were not an integral part of the City's original *Culture Plan*, they are now the pre-eminent avenue through which Toronto's culture is driven. However, further inquiry is required to ascertain the extent to which the City, Toronto's city council, and urban planners deserve credit for this festivalization.

Has Toronto done enough?

In recent years, Toronto has emerged as a dynamic, international, multiethnic, and cultural city. Moreover, Toronto residents and tourists visiting Toronto have clearly embraced festivals as cultural experiences. This is well supported by increased attendance at cultural events in general and at festivals such as WOTS and the TIFF. At the outset, it would appear that much of this success could be attributed to Toronto's efforts to establish itself as an international cultural city. Unfortunately, the City's actual record of support for the creative city and cultural industries is disappointing.

Six years after the release of the *Culture Plan*, some shortcomings and failures are becoming evident. For example, one of the plan's most prominent initiatives to turn University Avenue into an 'Avenue of the Arts' is an idea that has failed to gain traction. A simple Google search as well as a stroll along University Avenue reveals scant mention of it being an 'Avenue of the Arts.'

This was a potentially simple initiative given the number of permanent and temporary cultural institutions already located along or near University Avenue. Some plaques inaugurating the street, maps displaying its cultural events and institutions, and some cultural artifacts along its sidewalks like statues or sculptures could have easily accomplished this re-branding.

TABLE 1.3

Per Capita Investment in Arts and Culture

Year	Toronto	Vancouver	Montreal
2003	\$14.00	\$19.00	\$32.00
2005	\$16.00	\$26.00	\$33.00
2007	\$18.00	N/A	N/A

Source: City of Toronto (2008). *Culture Plan Progress Report II* (p. 11)

Another disappointment has been Toronto’s inability to increase per capita cultural expenditures significantly, even to levels commensurate with other Canadian cities. This was a central objective in the *Culture Plan* as per capita expenditure is a key indicator of cultural growth in both individual and comparative contexts. While current data reveals that cultural spending has increased, growth has been slow, and Toronto continues to lag behind other Canadian cities. Between 2003 and 2005, per capita cultural expenditures in Toronto increased by just \$2 from \$14 to \$16. During the same period, per capita cultural spending increased in Vancouver from \$19 to \$26 and from \$32 to \$33 in Montreal. This suggests that from a fiscal perspective the municipality needs to do much more to expedite Toronto’s cultural development.

However, regardless of the municipal government’s actual impact on cultural growth, the fact remains that Toronto has developed into a cultural capital. In 2008, *Foreign Policy* released a “Global Cities Index” in which international metropolises were ranked across five categories --

Business Activity, Human Capital, Information Exchange, Cultural Experience, and Political Engagement -- to determine the world's top global cities. Toronto finished tenth overall, propelled largely by its cultural activity. Despite ranking just twenty-sixth in business activity, eighteenth in information exchange and twenty-fourth in political engagement, Toronto was tenth in human capital and fourth overall in cultural experience. In the latter category, Toronto placed behind only London, Paris and New York, and well ahead of renowned cultural centres Amsterdam (twelfth) and Rome (fifteenth) (Foreign Policy, 2008).

This ranking is most likely attributable to the annual TIFF, North America's largest film festival, which attracts high profile celebrities, paparazzi, and stargazers to Toronto every September. With its global profile, TIFF has likely had a significant impact on how foreigners perceive and rank Toronto's cultural industries. Nevertheless, the overall cultural experience also includes the newly renovated ROM and AGO, the highly attended Nuit Blanche (with an estimated one million visitors in 2008) and even WOTS (with 250,000 patrons). Despite the disappointing efforts of the municipality, Toronto has clearly emerged as a desirable destination for local and non-native cultural consumers, led by its festivals.

Next steps and lessons learned

The overarching purpose of this report has been to investigate the impact that WOTS has had on Toronto's cultural development. In fact, the impact of WOTS can be felt well beyond the City of Toronto. The emergence of what may be termed the 'Word on the Street movement' reveals that this particular festival has become a conduit of culture in its own right. Not only has WOTS grown in Toronto, it has also become a phenomenon across Canada. In 1995, Vancouver and

Halifax held inaugural WOTS festivals, with Kitchener hosting its first WOTS in 2002. Several other Canadian cities have reportedly also expressed interest in holding festivals of their own (Word on the Street, 2009). The growth of WOTS into a cross-Canada cultural and literary movement illuminates its overall success and effectiveness at offering culture for mass consumption. It also provides proof that festivals can and are being utilized to stimulate cultural development.

The next step for WOTS planners is to determine ways of ensuring that the festival continues to grow. For example, WOTS could be lengthened from one to two days; this would offer more opportunities for cultural promotion and commercial activity. Though this might require planners to overstep WOTS' boundaries as a literary festival, through musical and theatrical performances, even further than it already has, it would be necessary. Taking Toronto's festivalization into account, spectaclization through such interactive exhibits is imperative for captivating broader audiences and ensuring growth.

Continuing to promote the festival to Toronto's youth is especially important. While WOTS has done an exemplary job thus far with its children's exhibits, a further emphasis on adolescents and young adults is necessary. Not only do they represent the most impressionable demographic, but they are also the social group that most urgently requires a connection to the written word. This festival serves several important educational and social functions, including: raising literary awareness, exposing patrons to culture, fostering social interactions, and unrestricted access to literature. Involving and captivating younger audiences therefore serves the double purpose of providing continued growth for the festival while reemphasizing its educational underpinnings

While Toronto has not yet caught up to London, New York, or Paris as one of the world's pre-eminent cultural centres, it has joined a minority of cities that are amongst the world leaders in cultural industries. The information presented in this report underscores that Toronto's effort to become a cultural capital has not only been successful, but also innovative. Traditionally culture has been transmitted either historically, for example, Michelangelo's David attracting cultural consumers to Florence, or institutionally -- New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art or the Musée du Louvre in Paris. In Toronto, where festivals have triumphed, culture is non-traditional and uniquely Torontonian. In short, through its festivals, culture has been democratized by liberating it from its traditional forms and making it more accessible for mass consumption. Festivals like WOTS have brought culture to the public and are in the process of transforming Toronto into the cultural capital it so fervently wishes to be. It is now incumbent on city planners and budgeters to expedite this process.

Endnotes

¹ Map can be accessed at <http://www.worldlit.ca/assets/images/content/WOTS-08-Site-Map.jpg>

² From its inception in 1990 until the 2003 festival, WOTS was located on Queen Street West from Spadina Avenue east to Duncan Street. Although that stretch of Queen Street was closed to vehicular traffic for the duration of the festival, it ultimately moved to Queen's Park because of overcrowding.

³ See: Yudice (2003)

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Michael Bowmile returned to academia in 2008 following one year of working in the construction industry. He is currently in the process of completing his Master's degree in Political Science at York University in Toronto. Throughout the course of his studies, he has developed a keen interest in Canadian politics, North American integration and American hegemony in twentieth century Latin America. His experiences travelling and as a research associate with the Robarts Centre have fostered a strong appreciation for Toronto's urban and cultural development. He is indebted to Professor Daniel Drache and Dr. Warren Crichlow of the Public Culture Working Group for stimulating this appreciation as well as the opportunity to participate in this fascinating project. Despite dreams of a musical pursuit in New Orleans, Michael plans to settle in Toronto to pursue an education in law.

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Comments and feedback are welcome.