

Arts in the Mid-Sized City

May 2, 2003

The Walper Terrace Hotel

This gathering was designed to continue the networking begun in five symposia, on visual arts, dramatic arts, film and video arts, music arts and literary arts. In addition, the plan was to provide information useful to people across those disciplines, and to address some of the issues raised in the symposia. There is no intention to create another organization here. The idea is for people to follow through on their ideas.

The City of Kitchener announced the opening of a storefront, one-stop-shopping location, on King Street, across from City Hall. It will introduce people to the area and its activities. It will have modest exhibition space and perhaps a little studio space. The City continues its exhibits in the Rotunda Gallery, its artist-in-residence programme, and its support for such undertakings as the contemporary art forum and Word on the Street—which is seeking vendors, readers, performers. The city's Multicultural festival will be expanded, re-named "Tapestry." It too will be seeking participants and performers. (Contact person: Don Chapman)

The City of Waterloo is getting ready for its 150th anniversary and so is looking for innovative ideas and projects in the arts. It continues its support of the Waterloo Community Arts Centre, which continues to provide performance and exhibition space—and which often needs teachers for its classes. (Contact person: Betty Recchia)

The City of Cambridge is proud of its galleries and new arts centre which provides performance and exhibition space, offers classes in the arts, and hosts conferences. It provides support to local volunteers organizing arts events. (Contact person: Gwen Stott)

The Region of Waterloo has launched its Waterloo Regional Arts Fund, which will be awarding grants to artists and arts organizations, "to make art happen". Applications are now in for the first competition, and response has been strong. David Scott, chair, told the gathering that the board has \$75,000 to award this spring and has requests for more than \$565,000, demonstrating a wide range of creativity, in virtually every discipline. There will be another competition in the fall. (Contact person: David Scott)

The Computer Systems Group from the University of Waterloo has developed a Community Learning Space, online, which links artists to one another, provides a press room, a planning calendar, a series of artists' profiles, mapping facilities and a list of venues for exhibition and performance. It was enthusiastically received. (Check it out at <http://learningspace.uwaterloo.ca>) This is a project very much under development, and it needs input and use to give it life. Developed from the directory of the Waterloo Regional Arts Council, this site links to artists' websites and to other sources of information. It builds on and extends WRAC's lively website and is technically sophisticated, so that it requires a minimum of maintenance and is easy to update.

Time at the conference was enriched by "We Are Here," exhibitions of art by local emerging artists, curated by Sheila McMath and Soheila Kohladouz-- and by "Delivery," a performance piece of spoken word, music and dance, presented under the direction of Tom Leslie.

Dr. Stephen Preece, from Wilfrid Laurier University, presented his work on audiences and their changing composition. His research demonstrates that the older "snob" audience, loyal to a particular kind of performance, is being replaced by an "omnivore" audience, interested in a

variety of music and theatre. He suggests that the best predictor of a person attending an event is whether or not that person has previously attended a performance. It makes sense, therefore, to share publicity resources and contact lists. (Contact for further information or discussion, Dr. Stephen Preece, WLU)

Break out groups considered specific issues which have arisen in the earlier symposia. Again, these were topics for people to consider across disciplines.

The Community Learning Space was discussed as a networking tool, a place to share information. Suggestions were made about additional features which could be added to it: a historical archive, a chat room, a place to sell art, educational information, grant information. All these possibilities will be explored. This site is built flexibly for easy access and for changes. It needs minimal maintenance once established.

The Media Relations group heard very clearly that *The Record* cannot be the only place for advertising or for discussion of the local arts scene. There is just too much going on. And not every exhibition or performance is “news.” Local newspapers, TV and radio stations need a “press kit,” including information, notes about significance, and good quality pictures. Email inquiries are not useful; there are too many. Alternatives need exploring. For example, company newsletters will cover an event if an employee is involved. The Centre for Cultural Management at UW offers non-credit, free, online courses through their Cultural Management Institute (CMI) on a number of issues including media relations. Click on CMI at <http://ccm.uwaterloo.ca>

The Live/Work group shared information about what has been done on this topic. A great deal of research has already happened. A questionnaire demonstrating need would be useful. There is a lot of empty space around. Barter Works, at the Working Centre, can be of help to artists, trading skills and space. Andrew Wright has created a website linking to other places which have wonderful projects in place and offering additional information: livework.org. Laura Johnson’s book, *The Co-Workplace*, demonstrates that it is important to humanize home based work, to be aware of social isolation. Decent live/work space would help to revitalize the inner core of Kitchener, would help with safety issues. The feeling is that it is time to move forward in this area. The need is pressing and the engineering studies are available. There are lots of models from other places. Political will is lacking.

The Festivals group found that there is lot of expertise and experience in the area, as well as a number of festivals. Some people want to work on additional ones, such as a fringe festival (at UW), a jazz festival (Waterloo), a drama festival (the area), new film festivals. Several people made connections to follow up on these interests. There was considerable discussion on government/volunteer support. At the very least, municipal governments can help provide expertise and contacts. It might be a good idea to link some festivals—more visibility would then be provided for each. A good marketing plan costs money and needs expertise; working together could make these more accessible.

Promotion/Publicity/Marketing is a vexed issue which has come up over and over again. Media are changing, and expertise is hard to come by for small groups. This group shared ideas about what to do. The Internet has become an astonishing marketing/publicity tool. Use it. Do not make online posters too sophisticated. Not everyone has software to handle them. It’s a good idea to market in unusual places: trade fairs, artist fairs, malls, fish market . . . Present work rather than CV. Think about what the public needs to know—not necessarily what’s important to you. Network; get known. Copy press kits and websites you like. Send clear information and good pictures. Don’t forget word-of-mouth. Buy help when you need it. The investment is worth it.

Recommendations

This was not a conference with formal resolutions and manifestos. There are, nevertheless, some over-riding observations and recommendations which can be drawn out of the day and its conversations.

1. This conference and the symposia leading up to it have been very well received. They have generated contacts and several continuing projects. Perhaps, using these contacts, people will find reasons to get together. Next year, about this time, the Community Arts Ontario annual conference will be held here, and posters from arts events around the area will be showcased at that time.
2. Some access to marketing expertise is very important for individual artists and small groups.
3. The Community Learning Space project is important and deserves support, as a way to link artists in this area.
4. Alternatives to the arts coverage in *The Record* need to be developed.
5. Area municipalities and politicians need to see arts and culture as vital economic sectors, to be funded and supported appropriately, with on-going support, reasonably accessible.
6. The Waterloo Regional Arts Council has become important to the arts in this area. It deserves more stable funding from the municipalities and the Region.
7. Live/work projects in city cores would energize and revitalize them. They would offer space to artists who are often living and working in unsafe space.
8. Outreach to local citizens, and beyond this area, providing information about the arts scene here is vitally important. Much of it is virtually unknown.
9. Corporate funding for the arts has not replaced the money cut from public budgets. Many artists and arts organizations are floundering.

Growing out of these general observations, are some very specific possibilities.

1. Develop a drama festival that links a number of different venues and performances.
2. Create/support an Arts Promotion Alliance that helps individual artists with promotion.
3. Extend/use/sustain the Community Learning Space website developed by UW and the Waterloo Regional Arts Council.
4. Improve and stabilize funding for the Waterloo Regional Arts Council.
5. Develop the literary reviews website based at the Waterloo Public Library.
6. Hold a poster show next spring celebrating all the arts events of the year.
7. Maintain the contacts developed through these symposia and help publicize one another's events.
8. Do the survey to describe the needs for live/work space.
9. Hold a major show for emerging artists.
10. Make sure that local politicians engage arts issues in the upcoming municipal elections.