

What is cultural planning by Bart Verschaffel

What is cultural planning? What can we expect from cultural planning?

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Abstract

What do we want?

What is cultural planning about? As always, metaphors secretly direct and limit what we are able to think and formulate. One can, roughly, distinguish between metaphors taken from the mechanical and taken from the organically. Is cultural politics and management about good ways to ‘*produce*’ culture or is it about ‘*cultivating*’ culture? Or – the same opposition now transferred to the organically – is cultural politics about how to squeeze oranges in the best possible way or about growing oranges? Is cultural politics about realizing ‘*projects*’ or ‘*creating possibilities*’? The current domination of mechanical metaphors is assessing ‘*productivity*’ is not without danger.

What can we expect from cultural planning?

It becomes more and more evident that *cultural planning*, in the broad sense – cultural policy of cities, the management of museums and public libraries, educational policy, university management – is dominated nowadays by a very specific idea or ‘*paradigm*’ of what ‘*good practice*’ is. Good practice is *productive* – from the Latin word *pro-ducere*: to bring about something. And the products to be produced are *results*. Results that can be verified, quantified, and controlled. The result of an action or a policy legitimizes, *a posteriori*, the soundness of the project and the quality of the execution. In this way we immediately dispose of a criterion of rankings. A practice is more successful when that practice is more productive. Applied to the field of our reflection today: a cultural policy is better when more and more people attend theatre performances and visit museums, when they take more books on loan from the library, when the scientists and academics publish more articles, when their quotation index rises, when the academics obtain more projects and bring more money to the university.

Certainly, there is nothing wrong with knowing well how to squeeze oranges in the best possible ways. There is nothing wrong with knowing how to select the most succulent oranges and developing the technique to squeeze the best oranges in the most productive way. It is, by the way, not very difficult – if you have a lot of money: you first need some good ‘*scouting*’, and then you buy the best singers, artists, architects, scientists, academics you can find, and you pay them well for good results. There is nothing wrong with this – with having ‘*champions league*’ football and with having a few east coast top universities.

However, knowing well how to *squeeze* oranges is something completely different from knowing how to *grow* oranges. To squeeze fruit is different from irrigating and making the ground fertile. *Producing results is very different from producing possibilities.* Things go really wrong – I believe – when the principles and the models of ‘good practice’ of cultural planning are dominated by the ‘squeeze’ logic – when planning is obsessed with ‘results’ – and does not know anymore how to create, and be in charge of, *possibilities*.

This is because a planning policy for culture, for the arts, or for science, obsessed by results is even more problematic than my metaphor suggests. Culture, art, science is namely about *exceptions*. The curators, conductors, artists, master thinkers, and scientists we need and look for are *exceptional* people. And one cannot methodologically or systematically produce exceptions, produce outstanding performances, or raise ‘centres of excellence’. One can only create the conditions or a favourable environment for this rare breed to develop and to flourish – unpredictable as to when and how. To make exceptions grow, one has to create *possibilities*.

The first and the most important factor there is an environment that is capable of recognizing and tolerating exceptions. An environment that is not *afraid* of exceptions. The best guarantee here is a high ‘average’, a good intellectual ‘middle class’, that is smart and generous or a good, general, intellectual culture, spread among a significant group of people. Those ‘average’ people don’t need to be exceptional, but very good or just good. Plain good teachers, good actors, good artists and poets, good university professors, good journalists, good civil servants. Well educated, well introduced in research, interested in art and science, who have a *feeling* for excellence, and who are not afraid of people that know something that they don’t know and who can do something that they cannot.

It is essential that one creates ‘environment’ or ‘local intellectual cultures’ where exceptions can grow, unexpectedly. The defenders of the result-orientated planning logic, however, forget that man is an anxious animal, and they forget that the ‘squeeze’ logic is latently about discipline and control. In the ‘average’ environment – not in the ‘champions’ league but in the ‘normal’ museums and universities and offices where one decides about cultural policy and education, - this result-orientated logic levels down the work. See how nowadays, in all those institutions, everything is mediated by ‘procedures’. The first thing young researchers and creative people have to do is to fill in forms, and then wait for means and resources. A ‘project’ is a good project when it delivers exactly what it promised from the start and when it delivers just in time – when it is predicable and boring. The possibilities, the freedom and the ‘play’ necessary for the exceptional to develop is limited by a whole system of rules that – automatically – keep everything within the limits of what was foreseen. *Imposing this model of ‘good practice’ or the logic of results and control and assessment in the ‘average’ cultural and scientific institution works contra-productive:* it gives mediocre and latently anxious people all the means and weapons to manage their institution in a cramped and limiting way, and to reduce the ‘play’ where the exceptional can live.

We have now come to realize that blind economic growth and production without limits exhausts nature and endangers the future of the earth and of mankind. The new, important key-word is, *sustainability*, and rightly so. I want to make a plea for sustainability regarding to our dealing with knowledge and culture. We should be aware of the basic fact that the production of knowledge and art rest upon and lives from the basis offered by what one call the ‘intellectual culture’. Those exceptions that can be ‘squeezed’ in the select circle of centres of artistic and scientific excellence always *come from elsewhere* – they grow, unpredictably and inexpertly, in those places the kind of cultural planning inspired by the

'logic of results' transforms into a desert. A *sustainable* cultural planning, that really cares for excellence and top quality, has to take care of and to invest differently. The proper task of cultural policy is to create and support (also) a broad intellectual, scientific, and artistic culture, and thereby to guarantee *possibilities and opportunities*.

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