

CROSS-CURRENTS: ART+ AGRICULTURE CONFERENCE

Powering rural economies

(held at the Proximity Hotel in Greensboro, North Carolina, Sept. 3-5, 2014)

REPORT

compiled by Peter Smith

Impressions, insights, and thoughts moving forward for the 1419 initiative

Conference Participants:

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Background: In early September eight of us drove from Huron County to North Carolina to attend a conference on art + agriculture. Other attendees came from across the United States: from as far away as Alaska and northern California, to more close to home - South Carolina, Alabama, Kentucky, Colorado, and Georgia to name a handful. The USDA had a National rep there as did the US Treasury from DC. There were academics; politicians, artists and rural innovators gathered offering a variety of stories about their initiatives and many thoughts from their unique perspectives, from their unique rural communities. We were the only Canadian representatives and there was a rural innovator from Puerto Rico also in attendance.

IMPRESSIONS:

Inspiring, at times overwhelming, overall a worthwhile experience. The rural landscape in the US, while different in some ways, is not so different in many other ways. The conference identified plenty of rural challenges with plenty of engaging initiatives that amply fed our imaginations. Divergent/alternative sources of information can impact, getting out of our own neighbourhood and seeing what else is going on in the world can offer terrific perspective.

FOCUS ON THE POSITIVE: A woman from Idaho suggested rather than focusing on the problems in a rural community, present the strengths. She said the challenges can be listed in minutes while talking about what can be done with what is available has proven a stronger approach in moving forward. A fellow from Minneapolis-St Paul Minnesota talked about a challenge that faced the Twin Cities. A light rapid transit line was being built on the main street that connects the two centres. Businesses were suffering, parking was a nightmare; nobody was going down to the street during the dig. Springboard (a local arts initiative) got a group of artists together, paid them a stipend, and art started happening all over and around the crazy construction. It became an event, a revitalization, and folks started to come back to the area to catch the various exhibits, cabarets, parades etc. One artist developed a dance she called the light transit shuffle - people are now doing it all over the State. Business picked up, artists were working, the light rail got built. It was taking a situation that was difficult, grim even, and with a little imagination and ingenuity, by engaging artists, the thing got turned around into something positive, enriching. Whether it's the cultural assets, the rural leadership, or the initiatives, there is much to celebrate in communities and with a positive outlook and approach much can get accomplished.

THE IMPORTANCE OF PLACE: What makes a place unique? What draws people there? What will have people wanting to stay? Questions like these were asked during a number of sessions - the value of physical surroundings, celebrating the history of the place, the beauty art can bring, were all offered as to what can make a place unique. One delegate suggested we focus on just a few blocks of our downtowns and give consideration to the merits of visual art, performance and interactive spaces, inside those blocks. A man talked about rural communities who sought big box stores and chain fast-food outlets at the edge of their towns in order to stimulate economic development. What they discovered over time is that these experiments don't always work out. By having people visit the periphery of a community studies have shown that few travel into town.

There is a disconnect between the businesses in the village and the stores on the highway. In fact they sometimes feel like two very different places with little in common. And in the end some of the rural communities have lost their downtowns and with a declining customer base the stores on the highway (with no stake in the place) pack up leaving the town without a highway or a downtown culture.

GOVERNMENT: The relationship between government and rural America was on full display. A Senior Project Adviser from the USDA (US Dept. of Agriculture) and a Senior Analyst from the US Treasury were in attendance. There were local, State and Federal representatives, some elected, some appointed, some bureaucrats. One panel discussion focused on policy. The suggestion from the three levels of government represented on the panel was that policy needed to be an ever-evolving thing. A law or statute in 1988 doesn't necessarily mean it's going to be relevant in 2014 – yet it's still on the books. The suggestion from the panel was that we get involved on a political level and affect change – change that makes sense for rural communities now. I spoke with Andrew Dumont and Chris Beck (US Treasury and USDA reps) about how money gets distributed into rural communities and in what amounts. Chris from the USDA said his dept. has a 20 billion dollar annual budget and encourages rural communities to look at infrastructure as a part of their cultural initiatives. If they do then it opens things up to departments that mightn't at first blush be a potential financial supporter. Andrew Dumont from the US Treasury spoke about our 1419 Fund and also about the responsibility and importance of financial institutions to get meaningfully involved in rural communities – not as a form of altruism but in fact for their own survival. What follows is part of an email I received from Andrew upon our return to the great North.

“It was a pleasure meeting you and I hope that hearing about the Federal Reserve Board's interest and engagement in rural community development activities inspires financial institutions in your area to find ways to get involved. At the end of the day, it's not charity; it's an investment in the economy and future viability of a market that they may like to serve at some point for the benefit of us all.

I hope that your ambitious plan takes off and look forward to hearing more about it in the coming years as it evolves, so do please stay in touch.” Andrew Dumont – Sr.
Community Development Analyst Federal Treasury

BROADBAND: the importance of having reliable and up-to-date internet connection was brought up again and again. In fact it was mentioned as an inalienable right. It connects communities in vital ways, communities that might otherwise be dealing with a crushing isolation. With the Centre for Rural Creativity that connection is of utmost importance.

SOME QUESTIONS/THOUGHTS POSED: How do we develop partnerships and for what reason? How do we translate our role, work, assets, in non-arts context? What process tools do artists possess that can broaden the way we and our non-arts partners conceptualize arts-based activities and collaborations? Can rural towns be cool? What makes your main street unique? Share the risk, success/trust your instincts. Need, seed and feed. Social capital is the energy of the community. Public transportation in rural

communities is an issue that needs addressing. What of immigration to rural communities? Innocence isn't ignorance and experience isn't necessarily wisdom.

DROUGHT: Without exception, no matter the panel, or casual conversation, fresh water wasn't far from the minds of our American brothers and sisters. There are level 4 droughts in Texas, Nevada and California right now. The tap water in Kentucky is not safe to drink. And on it goes. I thought of my own complacency when it comes to water and one delegate from Texas said to me, I was complacent 20 years ago too and had I been more diligent I wonder if we'd be in better shape today? It is something to consider as we move forward: the health of our environment should be built into our 1419 mandate.

INITIATIVES/TAKE AWAY:

Do we create our own AG+ARTS CONFERENCE in Blyth for autumn 2016 and host it in the newly-renovated Memorial Hall with people coming from across Canada - some attendees hopefully coming up from the US and perhaps further afield? Is the focus rural youth retention/rural youth employment? I'd like to see the artist's component be strong if the conference is a go. Breaking down silos that sometimes exist between various disciplines should be key to the conference. Bringing people together that mightn't come together in order to explore - using creative thinking - rural challenges could bring about some engaging results and action plans. It'd also be grand if we built a walk of the Greenway into the conference - much can get figured out on a good stomp in the great out of doors. Jay Pierce, the fabulous chef from Lucky 32, sent this note: *I really enjoyed playing host and tour guide to such a wonderfully open-minded group. I would love to journey to your town to help spread the love. Just let me know how I can help.* Be terrific to have Peter from Part 2 and Jason from the Blyth Inn connect with this culinary wizard from North Carolina and using local foods from the County create the meals for the conference.

Like Open Doors here in Huron County that Rick S organizes, a number of States and counties within States have Ag/Arts tours that bring artists and farmers and a broad audience together. Do we create a farm/art tour inviting people to Take a Walk on the Rural Side, for those from outside our borders to Get Rural (the two captions are from Mary D.) Connect/introduce two strangers - an artist and a farmer. Take them to a part of the County they mightn't know too well and let them get to know each other in that unique environment. Have the artist (over a couple of months) create an installation for the farm - and then have the audience travel to see the various new works on the Ag/Arts tour.

Create our own CSA (Community Supported Art) project. 9 artists/50 pieces from each of them, 50 shares sold to the public, three pickup events where artists and shareholders meet and get to know each other. At each event the shareholder takes away a part of their artistic share. There could be a food component to this project, where the share includes local food. I've been sent a kit from Minnesota from Springboard with details. They are just wrapping up their 5th CSA project and the idea has caught fire and spread across the States in the last few years. The kit is at the office if you want to have a look.

Two initiatives that struck a chord were the **ELSEWHERE MUSEUM/GALLERY** in North Carolina and **APPALSHOP** in Kentucky. They could be models adaptable to Huron County and our Canadian Centre for Rural Creativity.

Elsewhere is a living museum set within a former thrift store. Bequeathed to a young man by his grandmother it came with three floors chock full of stuff - Army /Navy Surplus, bolts of Carolina cloth, furniture and all sorts of other things. The young man had an idea that over the years has grown into a local and international art centre/museum/performance space. Nothing new gets brought into the building and nothing leaves. Artists arrive in Greensboro from across the State and from across the world to create installations, do performances, using the stuff that surrounds them in unique ways. *“Inspiring new ways to look at and re-purpose recent cultural surplus, and activate contemporary memory, an experience at Elsewhere brings new concepts, perspectives and life practices to visitors.”* What if we discovered a store or old farmhouse filled with the stuff of the County, stuff of a life or many lives, and created a similar gallery/centre to Elsewhere here? And what if we moved the museum every year to a different location somewhere in the County. Visual and performance artists would come for a residency at a house, or a barn, or a manufacturing space, a business, and utilize the contents held within to create art installations. Performance artists could create pieces based on their discoveries in the space. With the location changing each year the audience would be a part of the adventure – the artists’ work would change depending on the material they had to work with and the location they were in.

Appalshop in Kentucky offers a lot of grist for the mill to assist us in specifying the mandate for our Centre for Rural Creativity. Appalshop started in 1969 as a summer initiative to teach young people how to shoot a documentary. What the organizers hoped was the students would gain a skill and then take their skill to the great wide world. To the surprise of the organizers many of the students decided to stay in Kentucky. Appalshop was born. In their own words...

“Appalshop is a non-profit multi-disciplinary arts and education center in the heart of Appalachia producing original films, video, theater, music and spoken-word recordings, radio, photography, multimedia, and books.

Our education and training programs support communities' efforts to solve their own problems in a just and equitable way. Each year, Appalshop productions and services reach several million people nationally and internationally.

Appalshop is dedicated to the proposition that the world is immeasurably enriched when local cultures garner the resources, including new technologies, to tell their own stories and to listen to the unique stories of others. The creative acts of listening and telling are Appalshop's core competency.

OUR GOALS ARE TO ENLIST THE POWER OF EDUCATION, MEDIA, THEATER, MUSIC, AND OTHER ARTS:

- *to document, disseminate, and revitalize the lasting traditions and contemporary creativity of Appalachia;*
- *to tell stories the commercial cultural industries don't tell, challenging stereotypes with*

- Appalachian voices and visions;*
- *to support communities' efforts to achieve justice and equity and solve their own problems in their own ways;*
 - *to celebrate cultural diversity as a positive social value; and*
to participate in regional, national, and global dialogue toward these ends."

ON OUR TRIP HOME: Rick Elliott, Mary and I stopped in Asheville North Carolina. It is an arts enclave with artists drawn to this Smokey Mountain city to create, inquire and learn. The streets are alive with artistic expression – from muralists, to chefs, to performance artists, to galleries, the place exudes a creative energy. Musicians and street performers on many corners, and there are plenty of micro-breweries... It felt like every bar and pub made its own distinct brand of beer. They were setting up in a town square for something called NEW BELGIUM CLIPS – Beer and Film Tour. It's an outdoor doc/short film presentation done in a large public space with a micro-brewery sponsoring the event. During the breaks between films, a time to sample the brew, there is an opportunity to tweet your selfies and have them displayed on the big screen. What if we created an outdoor doc/short film festival of original work at the natural amphitheatre in the Blyth Campground connecting it to local business/brewery?

As we journeyed further north from Asheville we passed villages in Tennessee and Kentucky who'd planted long swaths of beautiful colourful flowers in the highway median and ditches alongside the road. It was a terrific introduction to the town that lay just ahead... set the imagination whirring. Simple but lovely, it was a beautiful way to be greeted by a community well before we met a soul.

A STORY BROUGHT HOME FROM NORTH CAROLINA...

There was a story told by a woman, Nikiko Masumoto, from Northern California at the conference in NC. She works on her family's tomato farm and is simultaneously working on an arts project called The Catalyst Initiative. When not reaping the harvest and getting it to market – Catalyst takes her into rural communities all over the US. Her neighbor in California is an old time farmer – been in the area for a couple of generations. After college she returned to the farm and would sometimes see the old farmer working his fields. They shared a wave. She eventually noticed that he had a Confederate flag in one of the windows of his house and she wanted to talk to him about it but wasn't sure how to approach the situation. After a while, after they'd observed each other working the fields, after a bunch more waves, she crossed the fence, the border between them, and walked over to his place. They chatted about the agrarian, the weather, and then the conversation turned to the Confederate flag. He explained that his people were proud southerners who'd fought, with many dying, in the American Civil War. She took that to heart and went on to explain her discomfort seeing the flag for what it represents to her – namely racism. Because it was an easy-going conversation, person to person, he acknowledged her point of view. When the conversation turned to her personal life she explained she was a lesbian. He went silent and soon after bid her good afternoon. A few days after that she noticed the Confederate flag was no longer in his window. A couple of days later he met her at the fence and they embarked on another conversation about water conservation. It was the beginning of a relationship that is still going strong today. Fear

can keep us from being honest with each other sometimes. It can take great courage to overcome that fear and cross the gulf to understanding. Sometimes all it takes is meeting someone in a non-violent situation that you can arrive at a place that declares none of us are so different. That story got me thinking back to Blyth's Community Play Project, Many Hands, in 1990. The quote from the Reeve still resonates, a quote spoken by his nephew inside the borders of the play: *it's easy to get along with those you agree with, the difficult part is getting along with those you don't. But that's the community I want to live in.* Tolerance and acceptance can lead to some mighty powerful ground...

Over the course of the conference I jotted down bridges that might do with some crossing. I think there's a need for us to make further connections, develop more partnerships, in order to bridge gaps. Here is a very incomplete list of some of the connections I think could do with a little more engineering...

MAKING BRIDGES BETWEEN...

not for profit and profit
Rural and Government
Urban and rural
Agriculture and art
History and modernity
Old policies and emerging policies
Inclusiveness and isolation
Private/Corp. investment and grants
20th Century and 21st Century
Semantics/speak and communication
Idea and action
Old traditions and emerging traditions
Elder and youth
Talking and listening
Work and fun
Effort and success
Patience and impatience
Pride and humility
Innocence and experience
Artists and arts organizations
Organizations and organizations