

Edmonton Cultural Capital of Canada
Rapporteur Final Report
Jason Kodie

Edmonton's run as the Cultural Capital of Canada has come to a close. I'm fiercely proud of our city and its designation. What an honour it was and what a fantastic feather in our city's cap. This being my final report, I will do my best to summarize my perspective and to comment on what I saw happen.

What Happened

My first introduction to the Cultural Capital was through the 'Voices Less Heard' project. I was invited by RAFA (le Regroupement Artistique Francophone de l'Alberta). They were one of the initial applicants for the grant. At this point, the reality of the designation was clear to the applicants, and all attended with open ears and mind. The buzz in that room was contagious. There were six communities that were part of the initial application, and for the first time were seeing actual dollar amounts for their projects. It was there that I first heard the term 'Voices Less Heard', and remained intrigued. I attended two follow-up meetings through this specific initiative, and the excitement level continued as these groups geared up for the execution and presentation of their projects. While some of the projects have yet to be fully realised, most were put on display in their development (ie, showcase format) at the Community Celebration for the Arts on March 15/16, 2008.

From September 2007 forward, a flurry of media releases and print media were informing the public about events going on throughout the city, a nearly endless stream. The myriad of mediums all fell under the Capital Cultural umbrella and carried with it a level of pride and ownership.

Highlights

The Art and Science Symposium held at the University of Alberta was top-notch. Alan Lightmans' keynote address was inspiring and I held on to his every word. The balance and marriage of art and science that he put forth was nothing short of brilliant.

The Poetry festival was energetic and intense from the events I attended ranging from the classroom to the big room.

The New Years Eve celebration was one of the finest NYE's I've ever attended in Edmonton. Witnessing the enormous crowds enchanted to the sounds of 'The McDades' and to be held spellbound by the fireworks is a memory of Edmonton I will hold forever. The Community Arts Celebration at the Winspear, gala event showcased projects in their ongoing development. Project recipients demonstrated huge potential for their respective shows while giving Edmontonians a chance to discover communities they may have not been aware of. Take the GWG project for instance. I was unaware of the legacy left behind

by the closure of the plant. I recall hearing about it, but completely unaware of the implications to the hundreds of refugee families that found solace in Edmonton from their former troubled countries. I was moved by those who were watching the presentation for the first time... seeing fellow workers on the screen, hearing familiar sounds from the plant. Quite magical and privileged was I to be witness to people seeing one another for the first time in person and on the screen since the closure. There were gasps of delight and relief. A strong presentation and a reminder of an important chapter in our city's history.

The murals on the iHuman building (95st and 101ave facing south) are fabulous. What was once an eyesore in that neighbourhood has become an art display. The south exterior wall is now a brilliant panache of colour adding to the skyscape and visual potential of a once aesthetic disaster. Check these out (again, a former blank beige slate)

Hooray!

Les Francophones

La communauté francophone à Edmonton est si forte. Environ 20 000 habitants, puis de plus en plus des immigrants et ceux qui travaillent dans les métiers qui viennent de l'est du pays. J'ai eu le plaisir et l'honneur de participer dans nombreuses activités dans cette communauté charmantes durant les derniers 10 ans. Tandis que je me rend compte que je vis dans une bulle artistique parfois, ce que j'ai vu pour leur projet n'était pas des œuvres nouvelles, ni quelque chose que je n'ai pas vu avant. Bref, la danse traditionnelle de Zéphyr et une collaboration avec le conteur/accordéoniste Roger Dallaire et le violoniste Daniel Gervais ont leur mérites. Je ne dirais pas que ses artistes n'ont pas leur mérites et que leur travail n'est pas valide. Mais je ne voit pas rien de nouveaux là-dedans, surtout quand on essaie de regarder avec un œil de l'extérieur – la danse et la musique francophone avec les bases traditionnelles. Il se peut qu'il n'y avait pas d'applicants pour ce projet. Il se peut qu'ils étaient les meilleurs candidatures pour les fonds. C'est décourageant qu'il n'y avait pas quelque chose de neuf pour ce projet, pourqu'on aurait pu découvrir des voix moins entendues dans cette communauté au lieu des stéréotypes.

Results/Conclusion

This was a once in a lifetime happening, Edmonton being named the Cultural Capital of Canada. It is a well known fact that we, as a province and a city, have been historically underfunded in arts and culture development and promotion. As funds were dispersed and projects ignited, this funding may well serve as a kernel of inspiration for those that were successful. As the Community Celebration demonstrated, many of these projects are in their development phases and near ready to see the light of day. The numerous special interest groups and 'Voices Less Heard' collectives will hopefully continue to create and develop their voices and presence in this fair city.

There is a tinge of regret with the passing of the calendar as the celebration and pageantry of the Cultural Capital year has passed. I regret not being able to have attended as many

events as I could have. I miss the onslaught of media releases announcing the continual goings on in Edmonton in arts and culture, which created a buzz in this town like I've never felt. While there is a sense of loss, there remains inspiration in the fact that we know more of our city and the rich pockets of culture embedded in the communities of our city. My first blog for this project referred to me questioning our validity as a cultural capital, even questioning what that meant. My fears and questioning of our validity as a Cultural Capital have been dismissed and we are a stronger Capital as a result.

Websit Blogs by Jason Kodie

En Route Baby!

Posted on 7/16/2007 by Jason Kodie

I'm flying with my band to Toronto to attend and perform at NXNE – North by Northeast – which is a smorgasbord of over 400 bands in 40 venues over 4 days. Your standard schmooze fest for the music biz where too many gigs happen in too little time, so I say, bring it on!. Some bands open and close deals, others, like mine, play the gigs and attend as many open bar BBQ's as we can . While we took many cabs, we neither opened nor closed any deals.

We flew Air Canada, and shortly after takeoff, I opened a new edition of 'En Route', their in-flight in-house magazine. I do enjoy the 'En Route' mag, it makes me feel a little more worldly and a tad more mysterious when reading about the latest buzz in the bars of Budapest or how Istanbul is a hot stop for today's jet-setters, a crowd I can hang with for the duration of my read.

The cover of this edition features Hayden Christensen, an actor people may know better as the young Darth Vader. I'm intrigued and ready to dive into the June edition of 'ER', check my fake Rolex, and consider ordering a fancy Hungarian cocktail.

I always read 'ER' from cover to cover, a practice I recommend for the full jet-set rush. What I consider to be one of the many highlights of this fine publication, is you have the option of either one of Canada's official languages. Every smidget of the magazine is written with English in the left column, and en français in the right. C'est magnifique!

I'm having a jolly time catching up to the hip and cool when my 'En Route' experience hits somewhat of a de-railment. I happen upon a full page display ad for the Edmonton Cultural Capital project. I examine the picture. From what I gather, the shot was taken from Gallagher hill during the Folk Fest, circa 1993. The band on stage is indistinguishable and I can only tell you that Big Rock is a sponsor. The sky is grey. While there is a large crowd on the hill, the out of date skyline and the empty streetlife leave me sterile. My drink order becomes the usual, tomato juice.

The jet-setter in me is grounded. Surely this ad is an error, surely this is an insert – one that was inserted while the aircraft was re-fueling in Edmonton where we boarded. Wrong. Each copy of 'ER' is shrink wrapped, crisply packaged for the next voyageur. I was miffed. Beyond being a poor photo, it felt out of place. How is it that when stacked beside the exotic locales and other worldly destinations inherent in the pages of my beloved magazine, this ad creates a feeling in my stomach that can only be described as when your cousins' homely friend has a crush on you. I guess my disbelief had caught the attention of the guy beside me. I meet his gaze and point out the ad.

« Look at this, Edmonton, Canada's Cultural Capital » .

His eyebrows raise. I ask him where he's from – Vancouver he informs me.

« What's so great about Edmonton? » he asks

« Lots I suppose, just depends where you look and what part of town you're looking at » I retort.

I'm caught off guard and unable (willing?) to defend my city. My entrusted magazine has shone a spotlight on the River city, yet I can't shake the fact that it seems out of place. While one feature is extolling the virtues of Sao Paulo Brazil, the next full page ad is about...Edmonton.

He chuckles and so do I. A brief moment passes, then I turn the page.

I read about young Darth. I learn about the new BMW Boxcar. I am enthralled by a report of a father son bike journey across Germany. I finish the magazine and realize I have 2.5 more hours to kill. So I go back to the ad and try to look a little closer. I love my city but my struggle is with displaying that fact on a national/international level. Are we really that and are we ready for that attention? As a rapporteur for this event, I'm kinda stuck in the muck.

I try a re-frame of the situation. Perhaps one of the goals of this project is to challenge the stereotype of Edmonton so that an ad like this does not seem like an error.

The Cultural Capital project is more than just a spotlight on our diversity. This is confirmation, not validation. This is celebration, not competition.

To the uninformed and uninitiated, Edmonton can be easily pigeonholed into a bit player in the cultural landscape of this country. Having lived in Montréal, believe me, it's easy. Slightly older and possibly even less wiser, I now know this to be the secret and strength of our city. My apprehension is that now, we must to present this secret on a larger scale and prove why Edmonton holds the title, and acronym, ECC of C.

It's the picture that has me squirming, not the concept. Beyond the surface of SUV's and misguided architecture, Edmonton is one of the best Canadian cities with pockets of smart people, great communities, great festivals, yadablahetc – hey, I'm a convert and have been for years. The ad department may need some better pics, but the ad does belong in 'En Route', rightly amongst the hip and cool.

I'm ready to defend my city and yelp « Edmonton » to any passenger on this flight and fiercely hoist my magazine in the air while showing the entire passenger cabin the ad I was ashamed of. The guy beside me is, of course, sleeping. His loss I shrug.

Consider the Alberta Scene in Ottawa (2005), and Alberta at the Smithsonian Folklife Festival (2006) – two massive projects which showcased the diversity and richness of our province, while featuring some of the best in Edmonton's theatre and music scenes.

Consider the cities across the country who applied for the privilege of being named Canada's Cultural Capital – all with merit, but Edmonton was chosen. That in and of itself is cause for a 5 day civic holiday. When we get past the overlooked and not included, we can't dispute that these events happened, and this one is happening. Likewise with the ECC of C, there will be unsuccessful applicants who are just as deserving to be called upon to strut their cultural stuff right alongside their fellow Edmontonians, but economics and time fall into the equation. Were it feasible, this event could easily become an annual festival that would foster the numerous cash-strapped arts and cultural groups.

This isn't something you can buy, or comes in the mail, or can be summed up on one ad. This isn't a shrink wrapped package labeled « Cultural Capital » that you mix with water and enjoy. This initiative is an acknowledgement of our city for its' cultural diversity.

Here's a fact Jack - Edmonton is the Cultural Capital of Canada for 2007. 2008 will be another year for another city, so lets enjoy it while we can.

The slick ads and glossy pages of 'En Route' grant me vicarious access to a world I can only fantasize about. This isn't fantasy, this is opportunity.

Bring it on, and bring on the attention. Bring on the jet-setters, we're ready.

Art in the Hood

Posted on 9/23/2007 by Jason Kodie

I attended a poetry reading at Norwood school and listened to two poets – Robert Stevenson and Robert Heidbreder (hereafter Rob S. and Rob H.) They were but two of the many featured poets giving in-school readings, all part of poetry week. I arrived just before 9am, just in time to witness the aerobic warm up and doling out of snacks to the kids.

Schools have evolved greatly since my elementary days and are far more in tune with their communities - Norwood School is no exception.

Rob S. recited to grades 4-6. He employed urban myths - monsters, aliens and werewolves as his poetic vehicle. To his credit, these were not tricks to get the students attention as his 3 novels confirmed. Sometimes the toughest crowd to win over are the 8-12 year olds as attention spans, lack of visuals, and booming music are non-factors for the acoustic and accapella poets. While there was bum squirming and wandering eyes, Rob S. held the attention of the majority of the students with his various monster poems, change of voice, and student participation. Well done Rob S.

Upstairs to the library I went to listen to Rob H. who was reading from his published books to Grades 1 and 2. The term 'cagey vet' came to mind almost immediately as it was made quite clear that this was not the first time Rob H. had been before this type of crowd. His use of dynamics including shrieks to inaudible whispering in the same phrase, held his young audience captive. His presentation was inspiring and infectious.

I was more than pleased to learn that Norwood school continues the poetry curriculum beyond one token day of visiting poets. The grade 5 and 6 classes maintain their own poetry journals throughout the school year, with grade 5's re-visiting their work into grade 6. In my view, both poets delivered the goods in their respective presentations. Tough crowds, tough subject, all made entertaining, educational, and inspiring.

The same week, I attended a mural unveiling in the same hood, this time at the Métis Regional Council Zone IV located on 95st and 117ave. This project was a collaboration between two artists, Pedro Rodriguez de los Santos and Duane Linklater and nine indigenous youth from the Edmonton region. On paper, this seemed like a very cool cross-cultural exploration. My expectations were maybe a little higher, but I was let down by the mural they unveiled. Calling this project a mural is somewhat misleading. I would venture a « mural-panel » exploration highlighting aspects of First Nations imagery. Allow me to preface that with what I think constitutes a mural.

A mural :

- should be visible from afar, say a block away
- should not make the viewer squint to see the details, especially when standing underneath it
- should convey a clear message and an aspect of unity throughout the work

As let down as I was, I dug a little deeper.

The spark of colour this panache yields, I can easily say that it adds colour to a street in dire need of community expression. I can also attest that the speakers and presenters in attendance were nothing short of inspiring. J.R. Larose, the Edmonton Eskimo is a role-model and inspiration for aboriginal youth struggling with identity and hardship. His speech spoke of overcoming adversity and allowing misfortune fuel his desire to succeed. The Métis Child Little Jiggers were delightful and were backed by two capable musicians. Man I love the Métis fiddling style! Where'd that beat come from? What the, why the? Cool. Freshly Squeezed, the Aboriginal hip-hop group is a dynamic force that is taking their culture and its' expression to a higher level through a mix of dance, street cred, and a

level of respect for their roots while being in touch with the now in the world of hip-hop. So yes, I was initially confused by the mural and let down somewhat given that the presentation was in a parking lot with a huge blank canvas of concrete where I assumed the mural was going to be (and is in sore need of). However, hopefully this is the start of an outdoor expression of Native art and imagery which this town could unquestionably use more of.

New Years Eve

Posted on 1/10/2008 by Jason Kodie

Did you make it Churchill square on New Years Eve? Were you part of the 30 000 strong who rang in 2008 under a spell of hypnotizing fireworks? Did you catch any of the magnificent bands, 14 in total, all hailing from Edmonton? Were you part of an amazing celebration?

I ask these redundant questions to those who were there, with a hint of smugness to those who weren't. You would have been hard pressed to find any disappointment in anyone who attended the Nightworks celebration. There was magic in the air.

Edmonton Cultural Capital and Events Edmonton collaborated in this effort and gave Edmontonians an evening to remember as the year we rang in 2008 as the Cultural Capital of Canada. This massive undertaking was made possible through a string of emails that would stretch from MillWoods to Belle Rive, through meetings that would envy the Presidential race currently running in the States, and through patience and focus befitting of a Buddhist temple.

The cost to Edmontonians, Free!

What more could you ask for - an evening of fantastic entertainment highlighting some of the best musical talent in our town. Neighbourhood camaraderie under the chill of a prairie eve, replete with a waning full moon. At midnight, as per usual, came the fireworks. This spellbinding visual feast of exploding sounds and colour put together by ProFX, (Calgary, ok, we can let that one go), was stunning. The soundtrack to the display featured the music of the majority of the evening's performers. The sea of 30 000, and growing by the second, revelers in Churchill Square swayed harmoniously to the sights and sounds that filled the air with hope and joy. Magic. Did I mention this was free?

This year's event was a co-pro which allowed for Edmonton Cultural Capital to fund the entertainment and for Events Edmonton to fund the production. ECC of C had indicated in their initial application that this event was part of their vision – a celebration for all Edmontonians that would usher in the New Year. They delivered as promised.

Sadly, this may not be the case next year as this was perhaps a one time happening for such a large scale event. Events Edmonton has been producing the event since the demise of the former « First Night » celebration. They graciously allowed for this co-production, and will continue to handle New Years Eve celebrations for the future.

I for one believe they could use more assistance and a larger budget which will allow them to continue in the same vein. Next years celebration should be better than the last. Alright, I could handle a reduction in the fireworks as them there things are damn expensive and can

eat up a huge part of a budget. Next years celebration should continue in the same vein with all Edmonton bands. 4 stages again, with some re-tooling and ironing out of the kinks, allowing for an even better event that will continue to enforce the legacy and strength of our culture, cuz we will never forget that we were, and still are, the Capital of the Province, and the Cultural Capital of Canada, right?
Call your alderman. Insist upon it.

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