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These Are Your Neighbours – Erin Oldynski

The culture makers of Kitchener-Waterloo

Local designers team up with the municipal government to attract the “creative class”

Kitchener and Waterloo are two very different cities. Imagine driving down King Street, starting from uptown Waterloo and ending in downtown Kitchener. At the beginning of the drive, we see a small but flourishing business district of upscale restaurants, pubs, and shops, and then the new Waterloo Town Square with its expensive boutiques. As we continue driving, King Street becomes narrower, the architecture of the storefronts seems older, and buildings are in a state of urban decay. There seem to be more pubs, tattoo and piercing shops in downtown Kitchener than in uptown Waterloo. The restaurants and shops in Kitchener are also more ethnically diverse and seem to attract working class consumers.

Changes in the urban landscape of Kitchener

But this is changing. The differences between Kitchener and Waterloo, at least on the surface, are becoming less apparent as the City of Kitchener joins together with local architects, designers, and urban planners, to reconstruct downtown King Street. Such reconstruction efforts include wider sidewalks, modern light posts decorated with colourful banners, more bike racks, trees, and planter beds, and specially-treated sealant on everything from light posts and sidewalks to protect against graffiti.

In addition to public spending, millions of dollars worth of new private sector developments are being invested in downtown Kitchener. Such developments include the Kaufman Lofts, Civic Centre, **the Tannery District**, University of Waterloo's Health Sciences Campus and Critical Media Lab, and Wilfrid Laurier University's Faculty of Social Work.

According to the City of Kitchener's website on urban design (www.downtownkitchener.ca) these reconstruction efforts are transforming downtown Kitchener into a “vibrant, urban, modern, environment full of creative energy - where the entrepreneurs, innovators and creators of tomorrow will live, work, learn and play.”

To find out why these recent reconstruction developments are occurring, I spoke with Brock Hart, Creative Leader at MFX Partners, a local brand design and communication agency. Since early 2009, MFX Partners has been teaming up with the City of Kitchener to put on a series of events known as Culture Camp, which was created by Hart as an open space style “un-conference” where there is no pre-planned agenda and participants discuss topics of interest to them. Culture Camp takes place in the main lobby of Kitchener City Hall and typically attracts city planners, artists of various mediums, and municipal government staff and council, who are all brought together by their desire to identify needs in the community and to develop ways of meeting those needs.

Richard Florida and the “creative class”

When I asked Hart why he created Culture Camp, he responded by asking me how long I've been living in Waterloo. “Five years,” I said. To which he responded, “Clearly, you're engaged in the community, and so am I. The fact that we are both here right now [at Culture Camp] is evidence of that. And yet, you and I have never crossed paths, until now.” He then explained that the aim of Culture Camp is to figure out how to help people make these connections and how to self-organize.

Culture Camp is part of a larger movement that aims to redesign urban centres to make them more appealing to artists and other creative types who fall under the category of the “creative class,” a phrase coined by Richard Florida, professor at the University of Toronto's Rotman School of Management. Florida's creative class refers to his theory that cities with high concentrations of high-tech workers, artists, musicians, and lesbians and gays, correlate with a higher level of economic development.

Although this idea has become popular only recently, it refers to a process that has been happening in North American cities since the 1970s. In New York City's Soho district, for instance, artists reclaimed undervalued real estate such as warehouses and lofts, repurposed them, and made them appealing again to the real estate industry. While some call it redesigning the urban landscape, others call it gentrification. Either way, the process is nothing new.

For Hart, redesigning the urban landscape of Kitchener begins with identifying people who want to self-organize, helping them to make their projects sustainable, and then giving them the tools to make it happen. Such projects include developing an art incubator space in which artists can come together to collaborate. As Hart stated, "We want to get people involved in the doing of culture, not just consuming culture."

Holistic approaches toward creativity

Although this approach to helping people to self organize seems well intentioned, it is important to ask: who is encouraged to get involved in the doing of culture? When I asked him this, he said that he wanted to get all kinds of people involved, "including Kitchener Rangers fans." However, even though Culture Camp is intended to be an inclusive event, it struggles with actually being that. But why is this the case?

I do not have enough space to explore that question in this article, but I do know that culture is neither something that can be definitively "done" nor can it be implemented in a top-down approach. In other words, culture is not the product of municipal government planning. Instead, it is something that emerges at the grassroots level and which develops spontaneously as a way to address community members' needs.

When our cities are redesigned for the purpose of attracting creative residents, it is our responsibility as citizens to ask: who really benefits from this?

For more information on how local designers are working with the municipal government to shape Kitchener-Waterloo, visit the Culture Camp website at: www.ideastransform.ning.com