Throughout the past decade, in response to widespread economic changes brought about by globalization and failed experiments in creative cities strategy applications, calls have been made for a paradigm shift on the local level that has, at its core, a commitment to sustainability, and to democratic, community-owned governance. Within this shift, culture is, to varying degrees, positioned as both an intrinsic and instrumental force in the construction of ‘resilient’ communities and democratically-oriented citizen identities. Recognized here is the value of ‘aesthetic/cultural’ as well as ‘deliberative’ public spheres, and the need to fashion such spheres in such a way as to celebrate diversity and catalyze community cohesion.

While this strategic turn carries with it an air of novelty, it must be recognized that community cultural agencies have, since the 60’s, been conducting projects aimed to democratize local culture, and to use culture as a vehicle for local community expression and sustainability. Given this history, this paper asks: what lessons can be taken from community cultural development in the construction of sustainable creative cities?

My approach to this question is informed both by cultural policy research, and my work as a community cultural developer within a rural/remote and economically disadvantaged city on the west coast of Canada (Courtenay, BC). As Director of a public art gallery (Comox Valley Art Gallery), I have seen the potential for various cultural development projects initiated within my organization and others to be ‘scaled up’ – ie: used as broader civic engagement and community activation platforms. Initiatives such as the Gallery’s ‘Youth Media Project’, which provides marginalized youth with the tools and capacity to envision the future of their community and express this through video, show a glimpse, perhaps, of how localized cultural public spheres might be constructed in-line with an inclusive and participatory sustainability governance agenda.

Keywords: culture, development, community, sustainability