

That's all you need to succeed

David Hawkins
THE CREATIVE ECONOMY

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(Part 3 of a 3-part series)

On a chilly evening in December 1998, something special happened on the stage of Moncton's Capitol Theatre that forecast the coming of age of the city as a full participant in what social theorist Richard Florida calls "the creative economy."

It was a public conversation, conducted in English and French, between two remarkable and highly accomplished Canadians. One was the world-renowned Acadian author, Antonine Maillet. The other was John Ralston Saul, writer, public intellectual, and future husband of Governor General-to-be Adrienne Clarkson.

The topic was "The Right to Creative Expression." It was one in a series of televised presentations sponsored by Vision TV to celebrate the 50th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, a document that, incidentally, was drafted in 1948 by a New Brunswicker John Peters Humphrey.

The evening involved a lively on-stage discussion before an enthusiastic audience, including then-Mayor Brian Murphy. At one point, reference was made to Northrop Frye having spent his formative years in Moncton and even having studied at the old Aberdeen School. Saul, noting that the eminent literary theorist was a global icon, endorsed the idea of a festival in Frye's honour.

The remark was catalytic. The festival concept already had backers. Among them: Douglas Mantz, professor of English at Atlantic Baptist University; Herménegilde Chiasson, then professor at the Université de Moncton; and Paulette Thériault, executive director of the Aberdeen Cultural Centre and chair of a committee charged with developing an arts policy for the city.

In the following year, collaboration between their respective organizations, the city and the Greater Moncton Economic Commission (now Enterprise Greater Moncton) resulted in the Northrop Frye International Literary Festival, known today simply as the "Frye Festival." Now in its tenth year, it's an annual event that engages the attention of thousands of Canadians and has attracted hundreds of authors from around the world to Metro Moncton.

Does this seem like a roundabout way to launch the final article in a series on what New Brunswick can learn from Richard Florida? If so, bear with me.

Ten years ago, involvement by a hard-nosed, business-focused organization like the Economic Commission in an event like the Frye Festival seemed quite surprising to many. More than a few serious business people asked me, "What's this all about? Why should the Economic Commission invest in a literary event?"

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My answer was, "Well, we are experiencing the early stages of a profound cultural and technological shift that is transforming New Brunswick from its traditional role as a supplier of raw materials into a leader in a new age of cultural and economic creativity."

In his book "The Creative Class", Dr. Florida argues that the most important generators of wealth in the global village are creativity and innovation. In "The Flight of the Creative Class" and "Who's Your City?", he takes the argument a step further, stating that communities that succeed in the new economy are those that can attract and retain creative individuals -- innovators in cultural, technological and social development.

How do some communities succeed in attracting and retaining creative, innovative people, while others fail?

Based on extensive research and demographic analysis, Florida concludes that the chief attractor is the ability to provide a stimulating, secure and diversified lifestyle. Make your community or region a fulfilling and safe place in which to live, work, play, learn and raise a family, he says, and the resulting concentration of talented people who choose to live there will generate economic opportunities, attract investment and create jobs.

Whether they were fully aware of it or not, that is what Metro Moncton's economic developers, artists, authors, academics and others were doing in 1998-99 when they undertook to establish an international, bilingual, literary festival.

I certainly don't mean that the Frye Festival has single-handedly transformed New Brunswick into one of Richard Florida's creative hotspots. But it was one very positive step in a process, largely unnoticed until recent years, that is rapidly moving us toward that status.

Indeed the proliferation of festivals could almost be said to be one of the identifying characteristics of the process. New Brunswickers and visitors to the province can now choose from a rich year-round menu of special events celebrating heritage, music, food, fishing, wine, crafts, motorcycles, vintage and custom cars -- even hot-air balloons!

That's a clear indication of social and cultural diversity.

Let's look at a few other examples. On the cultural side, it's significant that the historic Maillet/Saul conversation took place at the 800-seat Capitol Theatre, a performance space that, like its sister theatre -- the 900-seat Imperial in Saint John -- had recently been restored thanks to a concerted community-based campaign.

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Suddenly, both cities had venues that, along with the 700-seat Playhouse in Fredericton, could accommodate audiences large enough to draw top performers presenting a wide variety of entertainment. It was no coincidence that organizations such as Symphony New Brunswick, Opera New Brunswick and the Atlantic Ballet Theatre really came into their own as cultural ornaments of the province once all three major urban centres had the physical capacity to support them.

The economic impact of architectural restoration is by no means limited to cultural locations and activities. Since the mid-1980s, New Brunswick has seen the renovation and re-purposing of a number of fine buildings that, in earlier times, might as easily have been leveled and replaced.

Early examples in Moncton included the former Eaton's catalogue building (now Heritage Court) and the former Marven's Biscuits building (now home to many large employers such as UPS). More recently the old Moncton "Y" at the corner of Highfield and Gordon Streets has been transformed to meet the varied needs of the ballet company, a financial brokerage firm (ScotiaMcLeod) and the company that I am associated with -- Couleur NB, a marketing communications and public relations group which includes a translation service (Text in Context). The juxtaposition of such diverse tenants under one roof is itself an invitation to creative synergy.

Looking beyond the impact of physical surroundings, it's possible to see that the process of cultural enhancement has been going on in New Brunswick for quite some time. Reach back a generation and we find the mark of visionaries such as Louis-J. Robichaud and Richard Hatfield, two leaders whose commitment to equal opportunity in education and to genuine language equality laid an essential foundation for the excellent learning resources and linguistically talented workforce that strengthen New Brunswick's competitive position in the creative economy today.

Another premier, Frank McKenna, was among the first to recognize the importance that digital access to the "information superhighway" could have for New Brunswick's future. Thanks in large measure to his support and the creative technological enterprise of NBTel (now Bell Aliant), New Brunswick today has very close to the highest overall penetration (i.e. homes passed) of broadband capability in the world. There is a direct link between that fact and the presence in the province of many thousands of secure, well-paying jobs in the call centre and information and communications technology (ICT) sectors.

Ian Cavanaugh, CEO of Ambir, an up-and-coming ICT company based in Saint John, is convinced that information technology has the potential to be a major driver of growth and prosperity for our province. In an article published last Saturday in the Telegraph-Journal, he affirmed this belief, citing the importance of

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universal broadband as a means of assuring knowledge access, enabling economic development and promoting trade and commerce.

In support of this opinion, he cites our universities, our existing ICT enterprises, our ability to attract and hold experienced specialists, and our proximity to markets in the Boston-Washington corridor as elements that can support a bid by New Brunswick to become an important hub for the provision and innovative use of information technology.

His voice is one in a growing chorus of what I think of as realistic optimists -- people who realize how well New Brunswick is positioned to be a player in a future that is unfolding right now and one that can help to take us to self-sufficiency.

Another is Tim Coates, executive director of Fredericton-based 21 Inc., a self-styled "network of New Brunswick leaders in their 20s and 30s committed to the future of our province."

As an organization, 21 Inc. grew out of the Next NB conference, an event launched by UNB in 2004 and dedicated to exploring future directions and possibilities. Its mission statement is straightforward: "Creating the capacity for change in New Brunswick by developing the best community leaders in Canada."

"Ideas are currency in the 21st century," says Coates. "We live in a moment of profound change. We must continue to learn, collaborate and apply new ideas to move forward."

As one means of doing that, 21 Inc., in collaboration with the New Brunswick Business Council, sponsored the Ideas Festival, a creative thinkers' conference that took place in St. Andrews from Nov. 5-7, 2008. Among the many themes addressed by speakers and panels were such topics as: "Energy, Imagination and Innovation"; "The Arts in our Social and Economic Fabric"; "What's so Bad About Excellence?"; and "From Hewers of Wood to Hewers of Knowledge".

As little as 20 years ago, it would have been unthinkable to present such a program at a New Brunswick business conference. Today, it's a measure of the enormous conceptual leap being taken by innovative young people who are building our future.

Events and developments like these convince me that New Brunswick can and will play an important role in the creative economy in the coming years. But you don't have to take my word alone for that.

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Two years ago, almost to the day, I attended a talk at Mount Allison University. The speaker was Steve Wozniak, co-founder of Apple Inc. and the man widely credited with having invented the personal computer. The event was associated with the launch and promotion of his book "iWoz" and much of what he said could well have been gleaned from its pages.

However, in the course of his introductory remarks he made one statement that was truly astonishing. He likened the Memramcook Valley and surrounding area through which he had driven on his way to Sackville to the Silicon Valley of his youth in the 1960s and 1970s.

Got that? In a favourable, way Steve Wozniak compared California's world-famous Silicon Valley with the Memramcook Valley in New Brunswick.

Now remember, this was not a comment coming from just anyone. Steve was the guy who, in his twenties, envisioned and built a device that would change the daily lives of billions of people and transform the way countless tasks get done in our culture, including how this article got written, edited and published and how you may be reading it right this second if you are online.

So what, exactly, was he saying?

After the talk, I asked him. This is what he said: "Hey, if we could do it in Cupertino back in the mid-1970s, then it can be done anywhere. You've already got everything you need right here, right now. This is a beautiful place, wide open to the future -- universities, energetic, enquiring, intelligent and entrepreneurial young minds. That's all you need."

One thing is clear: creativity and invention do not honour geography. New Brunswick can have a great, prosperous and self-sufficient future. All that we need to do to bring that into our reality is to invent it, create it. We can do this.

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