

The Third Pillar

The Globe and Mail article said it all. In the March 27 2002 “Cityspace” essay about Canada’s recent embassy-building spree, writer Lisa Rochon heaped praise on the stylishness, the “strong, bold personality,” even the “chutzpah” of Canada’s newest ambassadorial statements: the architecture of our new embassies in Warsaw and Berlin. It’s true, the buildings look terrific in the photographs, all cantilever and glazed volumes, buff claddings and prairie grasses (under a pedestrian bridge in the Warsaw example).

But their success is not merely architectural, it is ideological. It is about the “meaning” of Canada. Here is how architect Voytek Gorczynski thought about the project of the embassy in Warsaw (replacing an older model), wanting to render it as an “image” of Canada: it had to be “open and transparent, modern and democratic,” just like the society to which he had emigrated from Poland. Fittingly, then, it is open and glassy. (As Rochon noted, this is in extreme contrast to the statement made by the new American embassy in Ottawa, several long blocks of hunkered-down bunker.) Meanwhile, over in Berlin, the post-unification capital of Germany, our new embassy interprets Canada as as “open, generous country,” according to its architects, with the exciting, “key,” feature of a courtyard accessible to all Berliners, not just to embassy personnel. “In this way,” comments Rochon, “the project reminds Germans that Canadians make generous neighbours....The Canadian complex is a progressive notion of urban life, one that actively invites the dynamic and sometimes unpredictable mix of public and private interests.”

Well, nothing wrong with any of that. The question is, do we believe it - we writers, for instance? Do such gorgeous architectural expressions correspond to the “real” Canada of lived experience as artists in a monopolar world of diminishing national sovereignty? To be specific, what are our embassies *really* doing, behind all that glass and Manitoba Tyndall stone, to “remind” their neighbours that Canadian modernity and democracy is about its arts as well as about its trade, its business, its visa requirements?

The Rochon report is not encouraging. Apparently, the new embassies are the response to directives from former minister of Foreign Affairs, Lloyd Axworthy, who wanted the building designs to translate the uplifting message, “Canada is open for business.” In Berlin, half the site of the 10-storey building will accommodate commercial and retail space as well as “exclusive” apartments. Not a word about: a library of Canadian books, a theatre or auditorium for Canadian plays and films and author readings, gallery space for paintings and photographs. Such cultural spaces precisely invite and make possible that “dynamic and unpredictable” negotiation of public and private interests that ostensibly *mean* Canada. Why haven’t they been planned for? (Or, if planned for, why aren’t they interesting enough to the minister, the architects, the journalist to mention?)

Once upon a time, the Department of Foreign Affairs, then known as External Affairs

and without its International Trade add-on, dreamed of something called the Third Pillar. This was during the transition from the Mulroney regime - years of the debacle of downsizing, privatizing and deregulating, of the arts as well as of much else that still represented the public interest - to the first Liberal government of Jean Chretien. Many of us had been persuaded to vote "strategically", i.e. vote Liberal instead of NDP so as not to split the anti-Mulroney vote, inspired too by the promises in the Liberal Red Book - oh the naivete of it all - that they would spend more money on culture.

Among these enhanced expenditures was the setting up of the Third Pillar policy in Foreign Affairs, the other two pillars being Diplomacy and Trade, in other words, a commitment to the radical notion that Canadian interests abroad were to be advanced by cultural promotion as well as by traditional diplomacy and commercial wheeling and dealing. They even hired a body to fill the job...and we in the arts communities have waited and waited and waited for DFAIT to put some real money where their mouth is. (The body has long ago retired, by the way.) Two years ago, when I made the rounds of DFAIT's Arts and Cultural Industries Promotion Division (the "Industries" snuck in there some time ago) to find out exactly what resources there are for individual writers (I was and am chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee of The Writers Union of Canada), I learned that it supports exactly one project in Literature and Publishing and indirectly supports a translation program administered by the Canada Council. [go to www.dfait-maeci.gc.ca/arts/promo-e.htm] with a total budget (in October 2000) of \$85,000, a sum so miserably inadequate to the job that even its managers were embarrassed, explaining to me that they simply could not afford widely to promote their program for fear of demand so outstripping supply as to be scandalous.

In any case, I was reminded time and again, that in Arts Promotion "we work with the Trade side, waving the flag for Canada not just for artistic merit." It is to weep. Any writer who has travelled abroad and dropped in on the networks of the British Council, Alliance Francaise, Goethe Institut and U.S. information centres has probably gnashed their teeth in envy and humiliation: how civilized they all are, how crass is our image abroad. (We are on better display in the power centres of London, Paris and Washington.)

More damaging still is the fact that this parsimony of purse, this vulgarity of spirit at DFAIT continues at the same time as the much-trumpeted official speechifying home and abroad about standing up for "Canadian values." We boast of our superior indices of quality of life according to the United Nations, we organize commissions into the future of public health care and send them around the country with the reassuring slogan of sustaining Canadian values, we bask in the admiration of nations who persist in seeing us as a model of alternative (read: unAmerican) values such as cultural and ethnic diversity, non-violence and an equitable distribution of social resources. Heck, we even claim successful hockey games as a "win" for Canadian values. Yet, the very sector that daily undertakes to articulate and represent those values - the arts - is treated with distracted patronization.

Worryingly, even there where our interests should loudly and clearly coincide with the agendas of international social movements - for example, at the recent World Social Forum in Porto Alegre, Brazil - "culture seemed to be poorly represented," according to a report posted by the International Network for Cultural Diversity. "Yet a recurrent statement heard in many different debates was that culture should be thought of as the locomotive of the train, and not as a missing wagon, since it exists as the vehicle for information, human rights and education, which are the primary agents of development." Well, duh. Or, as Ovid would say: "Add the fact that to have conscientiously studied the liberal arts refines behaviour and does not allow it to be savage." As many a wag has reminded us, "Who remembers the names of the big bankers of Ancient Rome?"

I don't have a solution to this impasse, except that individually and in our organizations we writers must be in solidarity with those of our brothers and sisters who are unflinchingly making the case for the "value" of arts and culture in a globalizing environment - the case for the rights of people and nations to their own "eco-cultural area" where they create and circulate and take pleasure in their own cultural activity. This certainly isn't just about competing with widgets in the marketplace - that misguided strategy that so many of our arts organizations pursued in the 1980s, showing that the arts generate X amount of dollars every time someone decides to go see a movie. (We made the case, and had our budgets chopped anyway, at least in Alberta, in the name of "participation:" How many bums did you put in *your* seats? Only X? Whack.)

This is about promoting Canadian values whenever the ability of the Canadian government to implement cultural policy is compromised (yes, back to DFAIT, as well as Heritage), whether in trade policies and agreements, intellectual property regimes or "perimeter security arrangements." The Canadian Conference of the Arts and committees of The Writers Union of Canada are doing solid lobbying and mobilizing work, including on the "cultural instrument," about which more in another column. Of interest is the upcoming founding meeting of the Creators Rights Alliance, for instance, a coalition of groups and collectives exclusively representing the interests of Canadian creators in relation to intellectual property. "The Alliance is organized around the principle that creators' rights are fundamental to Canadian society."

Or shall we find ourselves agreeing with the nineteenth century American artist James Whistler that "there never was an artistic period, there never was an Art-loving nation"?

Myrna Kostash
Edmonton
March 31, 2002