

POETICS AND PRAXIS OF A CITY IN *RELATION* *ROBERTO BEDOYA*

Culture and Policy in *Relation*

As a policymaker and an artists' intermediary, I often reflect on how policy aims to fix through rules and regulations, while culture is fluid, and how these two energies create a perplexing and wonderful entanglement that haunts the lyric, the score, the drama, the crisis, the economy, the swoons, the sphere of exchanges between folks—in *Relation*.

A mercurial and key word for me in my policymaking role is *Relation*. I come to this term as I stated in another piece of writing... “like an awkward guest who has moved into a sphere of thought. My association with *Relation* is both poetic and complex. In this sphere, operating as reference point to me are the works of the Martinique essayist, Edouard Glissant, whose writing on *Relation* has shadowed my work, like a bewitching bird song. *Relation*, being the forms of understanding the manners of host, of guest, of interculturality, of kinship, of public, of policy, the movements of being within the transformative learning of these mentalities.”

So, how does the Oakland Cultural Plan and the Asian Arts Initiative Cultural Plan operate in *Relation* to the

ways humans perceive and conceive the world, a *Relation* embedded in the spheres of community and publicness? *Relation* in the stories of the ecumenical networks that scale out belonging as a form of community cultural development that animate the locale, builds the local, the city, the civic narratives that produces the rhythms that connects affect and effect to one another.

Equity and Neighborhood Identity

Most recently, I shepherded the development of the Oakland Cultural Plan, *Belonging in Oakland: A Cultural Development Plan*, which inform these thoughts about cultural policy and planning. Planning is a form of generating governance that manifest in calls of action that inform the ethical conduct of individuals and the public linked to art and to policy.

Governance, not government, is central to public life. Governance as the enactment of meaning and by that I mean the ways of understanding and experiences make claims on how we order and make our lives together as a public, that shape our sociality, embedded in *Relation*. I want to lean

into public and its porousness or what the scholar Patricia Reed refers to the “promiscuous publicness:” the Publicness of Farmers Market, of Chinatown, of cultural districts, of street fairs, of protest marches, of being in the gallery/museum or performance hall, of walks through parks or neighborhoods... all messy, wonderful and promiscuous, that our plans addresses.

A cultural plan should not aim to contain the promiscuous public sphere. It should be porous.

A cultural plan is about publicness—the secular we that includes people you don't know. At the same time, it is also about a community of shared interest, of personal ties: a writer's community, an ethnic community, the refugee community, the hip-hop community, the neighborhood community. A plan needs to be about intersectionality how one moves between communities—the culture of fluid *relations*. Publicness acknowledges the encounters that happen daily.

The variance between Community and Public that comes to play in planning lies in the establishment of boundaries, and how aesthetics echo in *relation* of this and that. The Asian Arts Initiative



cultural plan is rooted in community. It's not that there's a lack of reflection on public, but the aim to sustain its neighborhood identity infuses the report with an understanding of community as verb—the ways that Chinatown maps its boundaries and uniqueness, its *relation*, its actions.

Both reports generate statements about equity, that is where publicness is tied to community life; the locale (Chinatown), and the local (Oaktown), which is rooted in the governance of calls for equity.

The Oakland Cultural Plan states:

“Cultural equity in a democratic and diverse society recognizes: all cultures have value; cultural diversity makes society more resilient; and all cultures should have equal access to opportunities to achieve social esteem. This equity of opportunity entails: self-determined cultural expression, affirmation, and learning; spaces and resources for cultural production and participation; creating connections and

cross-cultural understanding and engagement; stewardship of place; and access to knowledge and skills to advocate for community cultural development.

Achieving cultural equity requires fair and just distribution of resources and the identification and remedying of institutionalized norms that have systemically disadvantaged categories of people based on, e.g., race, ethnicity, customs, gender identity, sexual orientation, age, religion, disability, and socioeconomic or citizenship status.”

Asian Arts Initiative's cultural plan states:

WE DEFINE CULTURE AS:
The shared resources, beliefs, and practices that build the defining character of a community, and in this case, our neighborhood. Culture also extends beyond formal arts to include informal interactions that define the nature and customs

of everyday life. It is a celebration of what a community is, where it has come from, and where it is going—its identity and memory.

WE DEFINE EQUITY AS:

Fairness. To counter-balance systemic inequities that create lack of opportunities, representation, and access, equity redistributes power and resources based on need to create a more level playing field resulting in more balanced opportunities for those who are historically or traditionally under-represented. Equity sometimes requires people with frequent opportunities and privileges to step back to make space for and share power with more participants.

The intentionality of both plans foregrounds the human right and emancipatory aim of empowering talent and community as a central ethos of cultural planning, of *relation* in creative placemaking and creative placekeeping practices.

When I reflect upon the Chinatown plan and the Oakland plan,

I think about the “we” that animates the spatial imaginary that inform these reports and the racial imaginary that is at play in our cities.

Oakland has been a largely minority city for decades, and the default frame of whiteness that dominate creative placemaking discourses has little traction in my town, or in the Asian Art Initiative report that focuses on the neighborhood and its cultural production that animates the aesthetic speech of Chinatown. The call for equity is essential to creating a just city, and to operationalize belonging as a civic charge that organizes our locales, confronts spatial racism played out in zoning and philanthropic policies and cultural norms that support whiteness.

Public Will, Poetic Will, Political Will

I often reflect about the entanglement of wills that present themselves in policymaking. There is public will, political will and poetic will. As a public servant, I think often of public will, in the context of the plural and the role of artists, arts organizations, politicians, civic leaders, neighborhood folks, in the “WE.” We is not the privatized “WE” of me and my friends, but the democratic ideal of “We the people.” (I joke that my charge as a public servant is to serve the anarchists and the white glove in how I shepherd my Division’s services). So how do “WE” belong? How do “WE” present ourselves as the plural? Through *Relation*, through cultural planning, through community planning, through public will, that shapes civic, the plural, and the “WE.” Public will is tethered to the ethical aesthetic and social contract between artists, arts organizations, government, and everyday folks that enliven the city.

Political will is tied to the story of “The Clenched Fist,” “The Arm Wrestling,” and “The Handshake.” These gestures tell a story of power, of political will and its outcome—governance. One also needs to understand how democracy is defined and employed in context (representative democracy, direct

democracy, or deliberative democracy), where the system of governance will inform the expressive life of a locale—the animate political will. As a writer and policymaker who works to serve the public, I engage in deliberative democracy as a form of governance in my practice in which dialogue and decision-making are the interlocking operations that position the inhabitants of the city as active agents in their own social conditions. (Policy follows meaning and not meaning follows policy). The ethics and analysis which is informed by these deliberative practices permits and allows for conjecture, contestation, debate, power sharing, agenda setting, and discursive practices that imagine and articulate our plurality and constructs equity. This cultural policy, it is a call for dialogue and deliberation on art and democracy, and how art and dialogue infuse our functions as inhabitants of a locale in the social actions of policy making and the social actions of imagination.

Let me end with some thoughts on Poetic Will.

I love metaphors. Don’t be harsh on the function and importance of metaphors in daily life. We run business that prompt metaphors. The way people use images, story, song, movement that make meaning—that enliven, shape and imagine our plurality—is important part of the work of arts administration.

I love metaphor, poiesis, the “bringing into being” associated with entanglement of wills that I engage in as a public servant. Further to this point. I understand as a policy maker how cultural policy is a form of administration and also a form of critical inquiry. The rise of cultural policy research methodologies and philosophies primarily within the framework of public policy has created problems for analysis related to artist-centered cultural practices, or community-driven cultural planning like the Asian Art Initiative. Policy Studies is a field that overwhelmingly embraces “policy” as an empirical science that separates facts from value. This sepa-

ration fails to engage with the phenomenon of imagination (poetic will) and how it effects decision making within artist-centered cultural practices and the support structures for artists, neighborhood voice, and their creative processes. Seeing cultural policy as a form of critical inquiry acknowledges creativity—the composing of the world that artists and the imagining public engage in.

Policy and imagination condition each other, and a dialectical *relationship* between the two is necessary to preserve the vibrancy of our cities. So often urban policymaking is determined by the drive to accumulate as much capital as possible, and the effect is to destabilize our cities through the displacement of individuals, families and entire communities, prompting one to ask: Is creative placemaking a Property Rights Movement or a Human Rights Movement in the City Making/City Design world of actions?—in the new localism movement afoot in US cities?

For me, the people who shape communities from the ground up—the urban residents who practice the art of poiesis, or making in the sense of transforming the world—should have the real agency. Acts of imagination ultimately shape the public sphere, where we make meaning together, in shared space. Imagination produces a “common” that is continually generated and mutated through our actions. Both by the imagination that engenders the dolled-up front yard with big truck tire painted pink and turned into a flower pot that grows pansies, and the policies behind zoning ordinances ultimately affect how a city speaks—the sounds of the city, the shape of its buildings, the unit of the block, the voices of the people who live there, their poetics. The poetics and praxis of a city in *Relation*.

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