

## Culture: The Fourth Pillar of Sustainability

"The fact of heredity is itself a major dimension of community. Our inheritance from the past and our bequest to the future each consists of two parts: the genetic and the cultural. Both the gene pool and the cultural patrimony are common property resources."

Herman E. Daly & John B. Cobb Jr. (1994). *For the common good: Redirecting the economy toward community, the environment, and a sustainable future*. Boston: Beacon Press, p.183.

### What is sustainability?

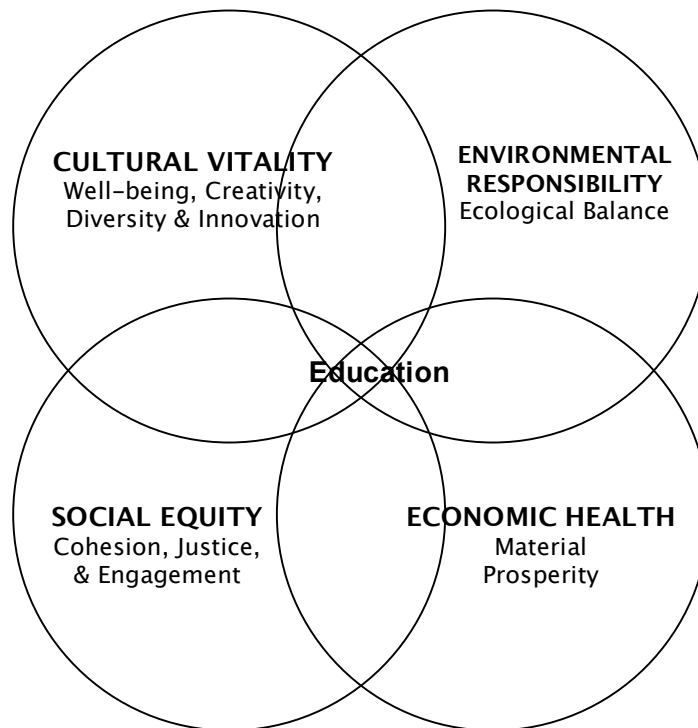
The most commonly used definition of sustainability is one which involves "meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generation to meet their own needs."

World Commission on Environment and Development. (1987). *Our Common Future*. The Bruntland Commission, UNESCO.

### Culture as the Fourth Pillar of Sustainability

The four-pillar model of sustainability incorporates four interlinked dimensions: **environmental responsibility**, **economic health**, **social equity**, and **cultural vitality**.

It provides a cultural lens in evaluating the impacts of the environmental, economic, and social Initiatives being implemented in cities and communities.



## **What is the relationship between culture, community development, and sustainability?**

Sustainable community development is concerned not just with retaining local industries, services, and resources, but also with doing so in an environmentally, economically, and socially beneficial manner. It increasingly recognizes the need to incorporate culture and creativity in sustainable plans and strategies. This is reflected in the proliferation and implementation of “creative city” approaches to policies, development plans, and strategies in cities and communities around the globe.

This model recognizes that a community’s vitality and quality of life is closely related to the vitality and quality of its cultural engagement, expression, dialogue, and celebration. The four-pillars model further recognizes that the contribution of culture to building lively cities and communities where people want to live, work, and visit, plays a major role in supporting social and economic health.

## **What are the cultural elements of a sustainable community?**

The diverse cultural elements of a community, both tangible and intangible, are avenues through which many socio-cultural, economic, and environmental dimensions of a community are embodied. Key cultural elements in a community can also be used as anchors and foci for policy and planning efforts to ensure cultural resources are integrated as a pillar of a community’s sustainability.

Cultural elements can be grouped under four general headings:

### **Physical assets**

- Heritage
- Placemaking
- Meeting/sharing spaces
- Public art

### **Opportunities for cultural engagement**

- Social opportunities
- Learning opportunities

### **Media**

### **Underlying policy and support systems**

## **References**

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## Ten things you can do to embrace local culture

1. **Buy one piece of local art a year, every year, no matter what.** It could be a painting to grace your mantle, one your children will argue over after you're gone. Or it could be a hand-thrown coffee cup that just makes every cup taste better, somehow. Size doesn't matter; it's the principle.
2. **Learn one new thing each year.** Take a tap class. Spend a weekend at a journal-writing workshop. Attend a demonstration on stained glass, and step up and ask every question you can think of. Then, sign up for the introductory course.
3. **Expose yourself.** That is, expose yourself to some form of artistic expression that you think you won't like. Catch the community opera presentation of *Figaro*. Or, if opera's your thing, take in an earful of the local grunge group, Spiked and Nasty. Think poetry's for the birds? Open your ears, and your mind.
4. **Give the gift of your community's artists.** This year, make every gift you buy something original: a CD hot-pressed by a local choir; a new book by a local writer; a hand blown glass bauble for the tree, and from the forge next door, a hook to hang a hat on – which, serendipitously, was hand felted down the street.
5. **Pass it around.** Buy someone else a ticket to something you enjoy. Take a friend along, or just treat someone you appreciate – anonymously. Have you ever bought a ticket to something and then been unable to attend? Don't ask for a refund: ask the venue to find a deserving recipient, preferably one who's broke. Or send two tickets to a youth centre or seniors' facility. At the event, try to guess who might be there thanks to you.
6. **Challenge yourself:** pick a good day and try to find as many art-related things to do as you can. Do them all: read the book, write the poem, play the tune, hear the band, watch the dance, applaud the play, go to the gallery. Challenge six other people to do the same.
7. **Sing.** Learn a song composed by a local musician and sing it: in the shower, in the car, walking down the street. Drive your co-workers crazy. It doesn't matter that you sound like a wombat in heat. When you go to sleep, dream about it. Now, teach it to someone else.
8. **Volunteer:** for your local cultural event, for the theatre production, for your arts organization. Sit at the information table, paint the backdrop, take the tickets, do the sound check, carry the chairs, place the podium. Afterwards, help with the cleanup. Then go for a beer with the gang.
9. **Join up:** there's an arts organization out there for you. These are the groups that make things happen, so you can buy things, learn about things, expose yourself, give gifts, pass the wealth, challenge yourself, sing like a wombat in heat, and volunteer your time for the fun and friends that it brings. Find it. Make it yours.
10. **Pass this list along to as many people as you can**

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Available online from the Toronto Arts Coalition: <http://www.torontoartscoalition.org/newsletter/v15/embrace.htm>

*"A small group of thoughtful people could change the world. Indeed, it's the only thing that ever has."*  
– Margaret Mead