

CHARLES-MATHIEU BRUNELLE Panel Presentation

Unusual sources for successful cultural incubators

- Creative construct International Symposium -

May 1 2008

TOHU is the encounter between a burgeoning arts community looking for a home, a damaged site in the process of being restored, and a poor neighbourhood unsure what to do with its rich potential.

This is not a model. This is an experience. The process is adaptable. Culture, ecology, people - what we call circus, earth, human - it's also a question of leadership, creativity and encounters.

POWER POINT : CLIC (cirque)

1st chapter: CIRCUS

TOHU, circus art city, was an initiative of the Montreal circus arts community. Its site houses a performance hall with the same name – the first circular performance space in Canada -, along with the Cirque du Soleil, the National Circus School, and the national circus arts umbrella group, En Piste. In 1999, the actors in Quebec's circus milieu wanted a purpose-built, accessible facility that would confirm their status as world leaders in the sector, and position Montreal as an international centre for the circus arts. Today, TOHU is one of the largest centres in the world for

circus arts training, creation, production and performance. In the beginning then, TOHU's mission was focused on the circus.

THE MINDSET: NOMADIC

Circus artists are nomads first and foremost. Traditionally, they moved from city to city, taking away with them the best that each place had to offer, carrying it within themselves to then be shared with others. They live off whatever their environment of the day provides. Like the tightrope walker, they are always moving, looking for that precarious yet vital pivot point. The circus is a crossroads. It promotes the idea of freedom.

We keep firmly in mind that spark of freedom that makes TOHU a playful space. It was in this spirit that we broadened our mission after a series of fortunate and enriching contacts with our next-door neighbours.

POWER POINT : CLIC (earth)

2nd chapter: THE EARTH

TOHU is built on a remarkable site. In the early 1900s, farmers grew vegetables there. Later, a quarry operation supplied the stone for the roads and buildings of Montreal. The quarry caused its share of problems, from dynamiting and dust to hundreds of trucks and noise pollution. As the

quarry pit grew, they had to find ways to fill the enormous hole. Done. The garbage from an entire city would be buried there, garbage available in enormous amounts thanks to the consumerism of the 1970s. In 2001, in response to citizen calls for action, putrescible waste was no longer accepted.

POWER POINT : CLIC (cesm)

This succession of uses created a very strange cityscape. Enormous cliffs make it hard to believe we are situated at the heart of a city of nearly 2 million people. By 2020, this 192-hectare site, now known as the Saint-Michel Environmental

Complex (SMEC), will be the city's second-largest park.

With a view to giving citizens a sense of ownership of the site that had caused them so much grief, we added an "Earth" component to our mission and became a partner with the City of Montreal to restore this extraordinary site. TOHU's main building was designed to serve as the Welcome Pavilion for this future park. In the process, it qualified for Gold LEED certification, becoming a model of "green architecture".

POWER POINT : CLIC (bâtiment vert)

The TOHU Pavilion, which stands at the entrance to the site, is a genuine standard-bearer for the organization's environmental commitment.

Biogas and geothermal processes heat and cool the facility, materials re-use was incorporated at the outset, and the "ice bunker" used to cool the performance space is prominently displayed in the lobby.

TOHU is helping lay the foundation for a new kind of urban park where the arts, nature, and people come together.

POWER POINT : CLIC (black)

THE ENCOUNTER IS KEY

TOHU. The name comes from the Hebrew origin *tohu-bohu*. It suggests the chaos before the creation of the world, the tumult of action and new ideas, the upheaval that precedes renewal, and the hustle and excitement of a big city. TOHU brings us back to the notion of finding a balance – so important to the circus, to the shifting earth, to the tug of emotions, and to conflicting forces that meet and mutually adapt.

TOHU was the result of an intuition. An intuitive sense that mixing different viewpoints and skill sets from different milieus would bring results. The circus, where it all began, found a way to

communicate its enthusiasm to the private sector, then to government, and finally to the entire community, in such a way that each of them could contribute their skills to the project. I like to say that artists, entrepreneurs and civil servants were the originator. Today, we are all aware that a common thread binds us together: human development.

POWER POINT : CLIC (espace fédérateur)

3rd chapter: HUMAN

It was this realization that led TOHU to take a hard look at the realities in its own neighbourhood, one of the poorest in Canada. TOHU decided to

graft a “people” component onto what was now a three-pronged mission: circus, earth, people.

By setting up in Saint-Michel, TOHU gave the neighbourhood the first cultural and environmental space it had ever had. Today, in addition to hosting a range of respected circus events, TOHU presents free public activities, including performances, exhibits, community celebrations and educational events

POWER POINT : CLIC 5 (programme employ.)

In keeping with a philosophy that citizens are its core business, TOHU’s team has developed a distinctive “Saint-Michel” job readiness program.

In a neighbourhood rife with chronic unemployment, high drop-out rates, and all kinds of psychosocial problems, we decided to encourage personal and professional development for local residents. Along with work experience, the team offers personal coaching and the chance to take individualized training courses that encourage lasting workplace integration. The staff you meet at the TOHU site, from the parking areas to the restaurant, the cloakroom and the performance hall, all have one thing in common: all fifty live in the neighbourhood.

POWER POINT : CLIC (black)

A SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT PROJECT

The organization makes its ultimate and unusual aim to become a source of identity, accomplishment, inspiration and pride for everyone living in the area. Everything it does is genuinely about restoring people's ability to dream.

Now you can see, I believe that culture has an important role to play in the sustainable development movement.

MIXING IT UP / HYBRIDIZATION

When we began, TOHU seemed to be a utopian idea, a dream of a better world where everyone was a full participant. That this utopia turned out to be doable says a lot about utopia.

This experiment has taught us that when we subordinate others to ourselves without acknowledging their share in who we are, we risk losing the subtle interactive play that ensures we will continue to evolve. Aoki Sensei In Japan told me “we live thanks to others”. And that to me sounds right.

Protecting diversity, therefore, turns out to be essential. The world is, after all, composed of fairly different elements, which take turns influencing each other. Let's keep mixing those up, over and over again.

In this neighbourhood of some 55,000 residents from 65 ethno-cultural communities, the *Falla* is probably the best illustration of TOHU's aims of including people from every background in the life of our cultural programming.

POWER POINT : CLIC (Falla)

The Falla, inspired by a Spanish tradition, is a collective art project, featuring an enormous wood-and-paper structure built by ten local youth as part of a community reintegration program, working alongside a professional sculptor. Once the creative process is finished, the sculpture, or *Falla*, is meant to be burned in the public square at a huge public celebration.

The young people involved in this project have a lot of baggage. They don't have jobs, don't go to school, and most of the time have no income.

The approach is not without pitfalls. Yet, in the end, the Falla is set ablaze on the public square,

symbolizing dreams and self-realization. It is a kind of ritual where the young people publicly celebrate their transition to a new stage in their lives.

POWER POINT : CLIC (black)

What we have seen here, has convinced us it is crucial to give diversity the freedom to exist. It is crucial to give it the tools it needs to grow, to give diversity every opportunity to express itself – whether biologically or culturally – so that new encounters can take place, and new mixes can appear, resulting in increased chances at survival. It is by nurturing all this richness that

sustainable development will be realized. Rather than “protecting biodiversity”, I prefer “CREATING biodiversity”.

The coming together of events that in the normal run of things would have little in common, generates creativity. This is culture in its purest form. Things are not linear. They interact as an *ensemble*, perhaps akin to a circle, or a ring like the one at the circus. Creativity is nurtured by its environment. That's true everywhere – in the economy and in society. Solutions are right there in front of us. We are the only ones who can grasp them, if only we would stop for a moment

and look at the problem with new eyes, free of preconceived ideas and pressures.

POWER POINT : CLIC 8 (P-Antoine Pichard)

These photos are from an exhibition by French photographer, Paul-Antoine Pichard, presented at our venue last year. I believe they illustrate perfectly what I was mentioning earlier – creativity is a juxtaposition, the meeting of conflicting elements – like a French photographer who went to live day by day for years with people who were living and working in landfill sites all over the world, making friends, developing confidences... These pictures are

stunningly beautiful and profoundly disturbing. They have the strange power to stir up emotions and have also developed awareness and the will to change things... This phrase was taken from the thousands of comments from visitors: « I came in here poor, no credit cards, no money in the bank. Now I am rich.»

POWER POINT : CLIC (black)

It is not enough to look at the world from the outside. If we want to see the world as a whole, we first have to acknowledge that we are *in it*. In my opinion, then we need to understand ourselves, in the same way we learned to understand what is outside of us.

POWER POINT : CLIC (Matthieu Ricard)

Another event was a visit by Buddhist monk Matthieu Ricard, who gave a talk entitled "Earth-Human Interdependence: From personal choice to collective choice". 1,023 people meditated together. No one left the room. And it was not a religious moment. It was a moment of reflexion.

Sustainable development then, is closely tied to human development. Projects of the future will be sustainable only insofar as all its various components are taken fully into account. Everything belongs to the same whole, in

constant interaction. In the end, it is not projects that are sustainable but the people participating in them. By putting all its resources to work and ensuring that everyone is participating fully in the process, creating “trust spaces” where people can evolve, develop calmly, and express themselves, projects will ensure their own sustainability.

POWER POINT : CLIC (trust zone)

TOHU is also this: a “trust zone” in which every individual – like the trapeze artist who puts her life in her partner’s hands – can be free to be daring.

-30-

POWER POINT : CLIC (crédits photos)