Public art is not an indulgence. Cities are expressions of our culture, and public art has always played a role in defining that common space. But public art can also ask the larger questions about what values we hold and what kind of city we want to live in — and it can propose creative, alternative paths to get there.

Urban planners are increasingly seeking ways to bring public art into their planning processes because of its unique ability to create common conversations about our cities and their futures. This is more than simply a trend; it is an effort to consider the ways that artistic practices can help shape public opinion and policy, and ask whether we can go beyond the conventional, top-down consultation process that takes place between citizens and those in power.

While consultation processes sometimes try to incorporate non-mainstream voices, this process still assumes that everyone will speak in the agreed-upon planning and policy vocabulary. But what if artists are able to use their own language to address broader issues where traditional forms of political engagement, city planning and policy development may fall short? Could an exhibition, with a range of interdisciplinary activities, foster this? Could it create new conversations about our cities?

These are some of the questions we sought to answer over three weeks in September and October with a public art intervention called Land|Slide: Possible Futures at the open-air heritage village of the Markham Museum in southern Ontario. The museum is located in one of Canada’s most culturally diverse and fastest-growing cities, spreading across one of the most agriculturally rich regions in North America. (Markham is on the edge of Ontario’s massive, 1.6-million-acre Greenbelt, created to preserve farmland and natural spaces within the rapidly growing region around Toronto.) Travelling to the museum from Toronto offers a window into a changing landscape: strip malls to the east, new condo developments popping up directly north, and the growth of subdivisions on class 1 agricultural lands is visible throughout the city.

The vanishing Markham is preserved at the museum, home to nearly 80,000 artifacts from the city’s days as a rural village. The museum’s barns, schoolhouse, blacksmith shop, church and general store are among 30 buildings that date from the 1820s to the 1930s.

Land|Slide commissioned 30 national and international artists to reinterpret these artifacts and heritage homes and comment on some of the most pressing tensions we face: the balance between ecology and economy, development and preservation, diversity and history.

There is a growing awareness among planners, urban policy-makers and residents of the importance of arts and culture within cities. Much of the discussion focuses on how a city’s cultural and artistic viability can attract tourists and boost the local economy. Since 2000, the City of Toronto has increased the development of policies, plans and guidelines highlighting the benefits of art and culture for the city’s economic development (for example, Culture Plan for the Creative City, Creative City Planning Framework, Percent for Public Art Program). Smaller cities within the Greater Toronto and Hamilton Area (GTHA) are following

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suit. Markham is one of the first of these to pass a culture plan.

Ontario also has more technical planning tools that can be used to fund and enhance arts and culture. The Ontario Planning Act’s section 37 allows municipalities to extract benefits from developers in return for permitting buildings to exceed height and density restrictions. Those benefits are loosely defined, but have included amenities such as parks, affordable housing units and the protection of heritage sites. Section 37 can also be used to spawn public art and cultural projects; for example, the Artscape Wychwood Barns and Triangle Lofts in Toronto show how section 37 funds have been used to provide floors of space and housing for artists in developments.

But section 37 has its limitations. For one thing, the Act’s requirements are only to provide building costs, not operating funds, which creates real-world limits for small arts organizations. Arts and culture often take a back seat to other community amenities such as parks and affordable housing.

In addition to developing arts and culture policy, city planners and staff have recognized the need to include artists in conversations about our cities. The City of Toronto’s Culture Division recently retained two firms to facilitate a year-long public consultation process called Making Space for Culture, which has engaged artist and cultural groups in discussions about how to use section 37 funds to create spaces for the arts.

Making Space for Culture acts as a two-way dialogue, according to Melanie Melnyk, senior planning consultant from R.E. Millward and Associates: the arts need to engage the public and planners. But artists often feel they need to speak in business terms and dollars and cents when speaking to politicians and planners, highlighting how their work will produce a return on investment. She believes that the focus should equally be to articulate the social impact the arts can have within communities.

Jonathan Metzger of the urban planning division of Stockholm’s Royal Institute of Technology is a forceful advocate for bringing artists into the planning process. Metzger thinks that artists are granted artistic license “to be strange,” while planners are expected to be straightforward problem solvers.

“The unique potential of planner-artist collaborations is based on the artistic license that grants the artist a mandate to set the stage for an estrangement of that which is familiar and taken-for-granted,” Metzger writes, “thus shifting frames of references and creating a radical potential for planning in a way that can be very difficult for planners to achieve on their own.”

It is this very freedom that allows artists to bring fresh perspectives to the decision-making process that shapes our public spaces.

The Land|Slide artists transformed the well-preserved, but static Markham Museum heritage village, opening it up for contemporary dialogue through surreal, utopian and haunting artworks. The exhibition sometimes blurred the space between past and future using installations, performances and sculptures. 3-D cinema and photography, and cameras that slow the world down and others that project it large. They augmented the past — in often humorous and always creative ways — to suggest intertwined lines of human culture, wildlife, migration and sustainability that must be considered as we plan and develop our future landscapes.

Among the many Land|Slide projects, three examples show how the installations created important conversa-
Artists have something to say about our most pressing tensions: between ecology and economy, development and preservation, diversity and history.

But these installations are part of a much broader research project. **Land|Slide** is the culmination of two years’ work to involve a diverse collection of stakeholders in a collaborative and interdisciplinary exhibition. It reached out to residents, environmental and food organizations, planners, developers, the City of Markham staff, academics, and the arts community, in the process ensuring that **Land|Slide** would raise important questions and issues within Markham’s planning framework. Among them:

- The Greenprint Sustainability Plan: Partnering with the City of Markham’s Sustainability Office, **Land|Slide** brought Markham’s innovative Greenprint Sustainability Plan to life through weekly panels and community mapping workshops focused on expanding the concept of sustainability. Through these events we have incorporated issues of the arts, food accessibility and heritage into the sustainability framework.

- The Greenbelt Plan: Aimed at protecting farmland and natural spaces, the plan is up for review in 2015, and was referenced in many of the installations as well as within the overall exhibition.

- The Foodbelt Proposal: **Land|Slide** was inspired by the 2009 Foodbelt Proposal put forward by two Markham city councillors, in which surrounding land would be secured for agricultural production. The proposal was defeated in 2010 when 7 of 13 councillors voted against it. By focusing installations on food, farming and land use, the exhibition reintroduced many of the themes that sparked the original proposal.

- New priorities: **Land|Slide’s** focus on sustainability, culture, community, food and farming, diversity and outreach may encourage new priorities to surface within Markham.

- The importance of the arts: **Land|Slide** intends to inform stakeholders and audience members of the important role the arts can have within planning and policymaking. Exhibitions such as this can foster an appreciation for the arts. An example of this is Marchessault’s past exhibition, the co-curated *Leona Drive Project*, which helped create North York Arts, the local ward’s new arts council.

- The artworks and interdisciplinary events of **Land|Slide** from food and farming programming to panels, workshops, artists’ talks and guided tours, all showed how a public conversation can be created around issues of sustainability, culture and community. As we consider what we want our cities to be, we must remember to see them as expressions of our entire culture, and ensure the artistic voice is heard.

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**En septembre 2012, le Parti québécois a gagné les élections avec moins du tiers des voix (31,95 p. 100, contre 31,20 p. 100 pour le Parti libéral). Après des années de domination presque sans partage, le duopole formé par le Parti libéral du Québec et le Parti québécois était ébranlé par la montée de nouveaux partis, capables de séduire plus du tiers d’un électorat de plus en plus fragmenté.

Dans un livre bilan qui vient de paraître, *Les Québécois aux urnes*, Frédérick Bastien, Éric Bélanger et François Gélineau constatent cet éclatement du vote et notent que les grands partis — et surtout le Parti québécois, dont la clientèle de base est moins captive que celle du Parti libéral —, ne peuvent miser que sur deux possibilités pour retrouver leurs positions dominantes.

- D’une part, ils peuvent espérer la disparition pure et simple, ou à tout le moins la marginalisation, d’un des petits partis, qui nuisent surtout au Parti québécois. Avec le départ de Jean-Martin Aussant, le débat sur les enjeux identitaires, qui historiquement ont polarisé l’électorat entre fédéralistes et souverainistes à leur profit.

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