



Arts & the Creative Economy

CARL LITTLE

The term *creative economy* was brought to national prominence earlier in this decade through the writings of the “maverick” regional economic development guru, Richard Florida, particularly with his landmark study, *The Rise of the Creative Class* (2002). In May 2004, Florida was the keynote speaker at the Blaine House Conference on the Creative Economy. The event showcased the contributions that creative individuals, businesses and nonprofits make to the Maine economy, even as it affirmed the potential for furthering the state’s quality of life through support of innovative and inspired endeavors.

As a result of this conference, Governor John Baldacci established the Creative Economy Council to explore ways to tap the potential of this sector. At the same time, according to Donna McNeil, director of the Maine Arts Commission, communities across the state embraced the idea.

In the many materials related to the creative economy in Maine, there is barely a mention of island communities. Asked about this, McNeil cites Monhegan Island as “archetypal.” Going back more than a century, the annual influx of artists has played a significant role in supporting the island’s economy. Today,

galleries, open studios and a five-star museum anchor a creative community in the summer, while a lobster fishery, itself based on an innovative concept of seasonal stewardship, helps carry it through the winter.

It could be argued that Maine island economies, by necessity, must be creative. While they may boast Wi-Fi and other communication amenities of the 21st century, these communities remain once removed. Creative individuals that choose to live on the archipelago must adapt and improvise to make a go of it.

If one were looking for a poster child for a Maine island creative economy, it might be Islesford, off the southeast end of Mount Desert Island. Barbara Fernald often showcases the island’s resourcefulness in her column in *The Working Waterfront* and the local papers. Whether it’s the boatbuilding school or a new community theater, she has plenty to report. Among 2008 highlights on Islesford was the trip islander Ashley Bryan took to New York City in December to be crowned a “Literary Lion” at the New York Public Library, for his life’s work as an author and illustrator.

Fernald is herself a part of the island’s creative economy, running a jewelry business from her home. In recent years

she has explored Precious Metal Clay (PMC), a moldable silver developed by Mitsubishi Materials in Japan in 1994. Her designs have earned Fernald a place in the wider world of fine art ornaments (she took second place in the PMC category at the 2006 international Saul Bell Design Award competition).

One of the drawbacks to working “on the island, Fernald says, is lack of contact with other jewelers. Through workshops at the Haystack Mountain School of Crafts, plus a few conferences, she has managed to keep a conversation going with other jewelers, although, she notes, “it is not the same as going down the road or walking into a studio next door to talk about design or technique.” At the urging of island potter Marian Baker, Fernald recently launched a blog site.

Anne Sibley O’Brien, an award-winning children’s book author, talks about the extra planning required to maintain a creative enterprise from a Maine island—in her case, Peaks Island in Casco Bay. “If I need to make copies or buy art supplies or run some other work-related errand,” she relates, “I can’t just take a quick drive somewhere; I have to plan a trip to town [Portland] on the ferry.”

The advantages of remoteness for O’Brien, however, outweigh the hindrances. To begin with, there are few distractions and temptations to pull her away from her writing and illustrating. And there’s the quiet.

Equally significant is community support. O’Brien reports excellent attendance at cultural events by part- and full-time islanders (around 75 people showed up for a book launch). “People are used to the lifestyles of self-employed artists,” she notes, “so there’s a high tolerance for strange hours and strange habits.” O’Brien never feels judged; no one, she says, “suggests you should ‘get a job.’”

When survival becomes the operative mode and the ripple effect of the recession spreads across the country, waving the creative economy flag becomes more difficult. Even so, states the Maine Arts Commission’s Donna McNeil, economic woes “will strengthen the argument for creativity.”

Meanwhile, McNeil reports, the Creative Economy Council has “morphed” into the Governor’s Quality of Place Council, a new entity fostered by the findings of the GrowSmart Maine—commissioned *Charting Maine’s Future* report by the Brookings Institution. Quality of place, McNeil explains, encompasses the sectors that will define Maine in the 21st century: “our historic downtowns, our beautiful natural landscape and our cultural resources.”

Maine islands deserve special recognition in the inventory of this state’s most cherished places. And we can learn a lot from islanders who are leading the way in terms of connecting ingenuity with economic development and nurturing the creative spirit.