

Saving Shaman Drum: A Call for a Campus-Community Alliance

One block from the University of Michigan's Institute for the Humanities, Ann Arbor's premier community humanities center is dying. Can we protect our local cultural landscape so that our civic ecology flourishes? Can we re-imagine Shaman Drum as a thriving independent bookstore, a sustainable center of learning, pleasure, and commerce?

At Shaman Drum, sales of trade books are up but textbook sales have plummeted catastrophically in the last six months. This reveals the contradictory effects of U-M's commitment to digital culture. Given the financial pressures on students and the absurdly high prices of textbooks, the university's policy that favors Internet shopping by students--implemented in Fall 2008--is entirely understandable. Owner Karl Pohrt wrote in his recent open letter to the community, "It is impossible for local textbook stores to compete under these circumstances."

Pohrt also said, "I don't think there are any villains here." Nor do we. We are writing in a pragmatic 'let's solve this problem together' spirit.

A Tradition of Commitment

We have a strong tradition of university commitment here in Ann Arbor. U-M's financial office has policies that favor local vendors. U-M's research office invests in regional economic development, seeding new knowledge enterprises

We've got a university that supports its own 'public goods' and their contribution to the community at large: the arboretum, botanical gardens, museums, the University of Michigan Press, and the Michigan Quarterly Review. U-M partners significantly with a major arts presenter, the University Musical Society. The University Libraries help support the Ann Arbor Book Festival. And we have all of this at a time when we are facing a state cut on funding for the arts, making the university's public and community commitments more important than ever.

The University's public mission is also embodied in its academic programs. These include a renowned cluster of scholarly and creative programs, along with living-learning communities such as Lloyd Hall Scholars, which sponsors Festifools on April 1, the Residential College, which has launched the Semester in Detroit, and the Michigan Community Scholars Program.

So the University has a history of support for community enterprise and good models to build on.

The Ann Arbor News cared enough to put the news of Shaman Drum's imminent closing on the front page, with a supportive editorial. George Wild, Shaman Drum's landlord, has

already stepped up to the plate, encouraging the bookstore to stay open and to consolidate its two-story operation on the ground floor.

We call on our university colleagues--administrators, faculty, and students--as well as our colleagues in the city--philanthropists, business people, and the local community of teachers, writers, and readers--to join in an ongoing, spirited effort on Shaman Drum's behalf.

We need a lively, strategic conversation that leads to realistic action. Here are some ideas that have surfaced so far:

- The U-M Institute for the Humanities makes space available for Great Lakes Literary Arts Center classes when the Institute's space is lightly used.
- U-M's textbook policy includes a statement on the benefits of the local purchase of books for course use.
- Individuals in the Ann Arbor community purchase shares or memberships in the Great Lakes Literary Center.
- U-M launches a center for the study of "the local" within an existing institute or program. With a joint board of advisors, drawing on leaders from higher ed and other sectors, this center could support research collaborations on communities of writing, reading, and publishing. It could also investigate other areas of community cultural development. Drawing on Professor Roy Strickland's model of the "city of learning" design and planning strategy used by cities around the country, the center could imagine Ann Arbor as a thriving "city of literacy."
- Shaman Drum, located around the corner from the new LSA North Quad, becomes a site for teaching and learning for U-M students. Students have few chances to reflect on their consumer behavior as purchasers of books or to weigh the effects of digital culture in a specific locality. Shaman Drum and U-M can provide that opportunity.
- Students and faculty in U-M's Nonprofit and Public Management Center and the School of Information work with Shaman Drum on developing a new business model and writing grants to support it.

Rebuilding the Commons

We know that there are other ideas that we have not yet thought of, and that is why we need a diversity of talents and perspectives. Indeed, we need a community-wide effort to rebuild the commons.

The 2008 election revealed American's deep hunger for a restored commons--for a robust public life. Shaman Drum, along with a few other key locations in Ann Arbor--the Neutral Zone, Nicola's Books, the Ann Arbor and Ypsilanti District Libraries, and the

Kerrytown Bookfest among them—is a humanities commons, a place where our public and personal stories can be written, told, read, and talked about. It is a place for making, studying, buying and selling the stuff of print culture. It is where we can test the civics of literacy.

In 2008, Geoff Eley, the Karl Pohrt Distinguished University Professor of Contemporary History, convened a national symposium on "Writing in Public." Speaking from deep personal experience, he summoned up the power of the cultural commons as embodied in Shaman Drum's project. This commons is defined by a belief in

the importance of...'deep literacy'...the necessity of finding the ways to sustain...conversations among scholars, writers of all kinds, booksellers, publishers and readers, if a culture is to retain not only its confidence, generosity, and vitality, but also its forms of optimism about the future.

Shaman Drum, Eley continued, has sponsored a

continuous conversation...about the possible ways in which the life of the mind and the exchange of ideas inside the University and the community can be helped to mutually enrich each other.

This effort forms part of a larger public mission that includes "all the arduous and inventive work that becomes necessary to bring the University and the community together."

Richard Howorth is the former mayor of Oxford, Mississippi and owner of Square Books, a famous independent bookstore. He spoke at a 2002 national conference at the University of Michigan about "Liberal Arts Communities." He addressed the role of independent bookstores, literary festivals, and partnerships with campus programs in fostering significant economic revival and cultural tourism in his university town.

"Obviously," Howorth said, "a university functions just as any industry does, by creating jobs." But then he went on to make a more specific argument about liberal arts communities. He was using 2002 data, but his argument, even with the current downturn in housing prices, is still compelling. He concluded that "universities that are strong in the arts and humanities"--here he cites U-M, the University of Mississippi, the University of North Carolina, and the University of Virginia-- "tend to create communities with lively cultural development and thus strong economic development."

Howorth joined economic logic to and to civic logic in imagining "an America I believe in because I have seen it happen, where it now exists, in my hometown." How do we get there? It takes a village, Howorth says.

Academic institutions need to work with economic developers to devise projects that are mutually beneficial, and the people employed by universities need to reach beyond the classroom to the public to promote the value of liberal arts.

It will need the ongoing and concerted efforts of campus and community to keep this ideal alive. It will take all of our talents to keep Shaman Drum and the Great Lakes Literary Arts Center among us. If, together, we can make this work, we will all have become partners in civic problem solving at a time of profound paradigm shifts in how knowledge is made, marketed, and debated.

Julie Ellison
Ann Arbor

Signers:

Robert Hass, Berkeley CA
Richard Howorth, Oxford MS
Thomas Lynch, Milford MI
Robert Pinsky, Boston, MA

If you would like to add your name to this letter, please email us [here](#).

For a complete list of signers, please scroll down.

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