

Summary Report of the Creative Spaces Community Meeting

Submitted to the Mayor's Task Force on Creative Spaces
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Introduction

On January 24, 2006, the Denver Office of Cultural Affairs and the Department of Community Planning and Development hosted the Creative Spaces Community Meeting as the official kick-off of the Mayor's Task Force on Creative Spaces. Held at the Walnut Foundry, the purpose of the Creative Spaces Community Meeting was:

- To hear directly from the creative community its needs, issues and challenges surrounding creative space in Denver;
- To offer a public process to the Task Forces' charge, which is to explore, examine and conceive – in the broadest of terms – ways that the City can expand, foster and develop creative spaces in Denver;
- To gather the innovative ideas and creative solutions from the creative community so that the Task Forces' recommendations correspond to the needs of the community.

The two-hour meeting was divided into three major sections – visioning Denver, SWOT analysis and specific topic discussions on affordability, availability, physical qualities and processes – all of which involved facilitated roundtable discussions. Table facilitators included task force members, DOCA commissioners and staff, and other representatives from cultural organizations.

The Creative Spaces Community Meeting was attended by more than 300 individuals – many more than anticipated. Individuals were assigned to one of 27 tables so as to create a balance of artistic disciplines at each table; the overflow created three groups that were self-facilitated.

At sign-in, DOCA gathered basic information from these 309 participants:

Creative Spaces & Property: I RENT / OWN / not applicable my creative space.

113 rent

104 own

46 not applicable

42 no response

Employment: I am a FULL-TIME / PART-TIME / HOBBYIST / not applicable artist.

162 full-time

62 part-time

13 hobbyists

20 not applicable

49 no response

Johnny Klein, creative entrepreneur and civic leader, presided over the entire meeting. At the beginning of the meeting, he asked the creative community to filter its discussion around three basic criteria:

- 1) Does this address the needs of both the commercial arts and nonprofit arts sectors?
- 2) Does the idea/comment/suggestion involve creative space?
- 3) Is the idea/comment/suggestion within the scope and capacity of the City and/or Task Force to solve?

The remainder of this report is a summary of the notes taken by each facilitator at his/her table. Full reports by table or by topic are available to the Task Force and the public. At the February 28

meeting, the Task Force will review this document and determine how it wishes to divide and sub-divide topics for review, research and recommendations.

The purpose of this report is to aggregate the information presented at the roundtables in a format that meaningfully and effectively captures the main themes presented by the creative community. It is important to note that the creative community is not monolithic, and therefore contradictory opinions exist. This report attempts to summarize what was most frequently voiced on paper from facilitator notes and draw out the major themes.

Lastly, as a reminder, the Task Force is charged to look at creative space issues only; many of the ideas and issues that surfaced during the Creative Spaces Community Meeting fall outside the scope of the Task Force. These additional topics are represented in this document so as to provide an accurate record of the richness of the discussion; the report will be shared with other organizations that may choose to act upon the additional ideas and issues that emerged.

Section One

Describe Denver

As the largest city in the Rocky Mountain region, participants described Denver as a “cultural island” with the nearest big city 600 miles away. Denver is “emerging” and is an exciting place culturally. It is open, relaxed and young. Denver provides an abundance of sunshine and summertime activity, great parks and cultural amenities. New cultural projects coupled with impressive architecture is thought to put Denver “on the map” nationally and internationally.

While the city has changed since the 1980s, Denver is connected to the cowboy image and very much a sports town. The real estate market is booming with a resurgence of lofts being the most prominent new housing option.

There are pockets of creativity. Yet, according to many, artists are segregated into the silo of their artistic discipline and there are few opportunities to connect across discipline.

Section Two: SWOT Analysis

Strengths

Denver is a “place where you can do what you love and you don’t get looks.”

The characteristics and qualities that the creative community identified as reasons for living and creating in Denver are likely on par with other Denver residents including good quality of life, sunshine, access to mountains, landscape, and a healthy lifestyle.

Many participants identified other qualities that could be considered more uniquely important to the creative community. The creative community embraces Denver’s diversity of people and spaces. As an emerging city, Denver is “big enough to have culture, but small enough to have community.” Denver is open and not intimidating. Galleries are approachable and more affordable. Denver is not influenced by the coasts therefore it is great for creating unique, original work. Emerging artists can “break in” easily and there is a positive growth rate for the arts.

The creative community identified many ways in which to capitalize upon these strengths including cross marketing with other tourist attractions like skiing and sports activities, utilize

Channel 8 to promote an arts calendar, and artist-in-residence programs in the public and private sector. The creative community suggests that DOCA survey similar offices in other cities – such as Minneapolis, Austin, Portland, Berlin, Paduca, KY – to learn what they are doing. Additionally, the creative community suggested needing assistance in becoming more proficient with the business side of the arts so that they can focus on creating art.

Weaknesses

“How does the city communicate ‘creativity’?”

“There is both no culture in the center of commerce and there is no cultural center.”

The creative community identified several weaknesses that can be summarized in four categories: affordability and availability of space, lack of funding, lack of marketing and lack of cohesion among the community.

Though many in the creative community recognize that Denver is more affordable than the coasts (and it is easier to raise a family), affordability and availability of space was a consistent weakness verbalized across all tables. Denver is becoming less affordable. As economic growth and development increases in the city, there are few programs that decrease the threat of pricing increases and dislocation. Again, zoning is identified as a common problem for live/work, co-housing and the preservation of industrial space. “Red tape” and bureaucracy stymies the possibilities for creatives to actively pursue solutions on their own.

Lack of funding options – public and private – is considered another weakness. This lack of funding options is leading to creative brain drain and the perception that Denver is behind other cities in creativity.

Lack of marketing, promotion and branding is perceived as a significant weakness: Denver does not have a clear identify of itself and does a poor job of marketing. There is a general lack of awareness of the economic impact and intrinsic value that the arts have by government, the business community, and the public. Media coverage is thought to be minimal. Larger institutions do not mobilize or incorporate the smaller organizations or individual artists into their programs or marketing. The absence of a coordinated Gallery Guide (including maps and gallery descriptions) is a significant marketing gap.

There lacks a physical and virtual center for the creative community: There is both no culture in the center of commerce and there is no cultural center. The creative community does not cross-pollinate to create synergy and is segregated by discipline; many just met for the first time at the Creative Spaces Community Meeting. Transportation that knits creative neighborhoods together is nonexistent. Many people suggested looking at models such as Boulder’s Dairy Center for the Arts and Open Studios event, and arts incubator models including facilities with flexible space.

Opportunities

“Unearth creativity and grow it – don’t import it.”

“In short, Denver has the opportunity to take risks.”

“Creativity starts at the City.”

There are many large projects that provide significant opportunity and hope for the creative community including the opening of the Hamilton wing of the **Denver Art Museum, Clyfford Still Museum, Lowenstein** redevelopment and **MCA-Denver**; each of these offers an opportunity to showcase culture in Denver to regional, national and international audiences. Furthermore, recognizing the value of tourism, the creative community sees the new **Convention Center, Union Station** and **DIA** as offering exceptional marketing opportunities.

The creative community also perceives several development projects as being opportunities from which they could and would like to benefit. These include **FasTracks, Gates, Five Points, Colfax Main Street zoning** and plans for **Civic Center Park**. Some sited **Auraria** campus and **Central Platte Valley** as areas where better connection between students and residents with the cultural amenities should be explored.

Upcoming conventions including the **AIGA convention** and **Performing Arts** convention in 2008 offer the opportunity for Denver to create a “new west” brand.

Participants identified several spaces with prospects for opportunity:

- Evans School
- Acoma Street (Avenue of the Arts)

To tap into these opportunities, many see the need for relational and virtual networks. Strategic alliances and collaborations among and between different sized organizations and across disciplines are very important during this critical time. The DAM is seen as the natural node to distribute information about cultural activities.

Threats

“Artists ourselves are lacking the will to come together to form an economic entity with strength and power.”

Growth and development are considered a tremendous threat to the creative community. Growth is leaving the creatives behind as lofts “take over the whole city,” and it becomes more difficult to carve out space to create. Developers and lack of government oversight threatens the balance between residents who can afford art with the commercial arts businesses who can provide it. Increased property tax expense was also sighted as a concern, as are buildings that provided arts facilities being converted to different uses.

Livable wages and health insurance are also threats to this community.

The City can help mitigate these issues by taking a hard look at zoning and related issues of noise and parking. Many feel that access to underutilized city-owned property is another way to create additional supply to mitigate these threats. The creative community can address these issues by coming together and strengthening their political voice.

Section Three: Specific Topic Discussions

Affordability

“If artists were better compensated, this would not be an issue.”

While some commented that artists are creative at finding affordable space, in general, many found space in Denver to be (or becoming) too expensive. One person noted that affordable is considered to be monthly rents of \$100-\$150 for 300 sq/ft, or the annual equivalent of \$6 per sq/ft; Denver is at \$15.60 per sq/ft per year. It is unclear if this is triple net or not. Housing and studio stock is overpriced and even the affordable units are not affordable. Lastly, affordability becomes an even bigger issue as artists are forced to look for a place to live and a place to create.

Many were not aware of any existing programs that address both the affordability issue and suit their space needs; however, many ideas were provided as a way to combat the affordability issue. Arts districts or areas designated for arts development which included transportation and parking was a popular idea. City regulations to slow market force or incentives for developers to create *real* low-cost space came up at many tables. Ownership and long-term leases were identified as a route to stabilize future affordability and the sector itself. Down payment assistance programs were also mentioned.

Availability of Ideal Space

According to the creative community, there is no central repository for information on vacant or temporary spaces. Creatives generally learn of space by word-of-mouth or Craig's List (www.craigslist.com).

Resoundingly, there is not enough creative space of any kind in Denver for creatives. Performing art space, rehearsal space and temporary exhibition space (not affiliated with a gallery) is significantly lacking. Current live/work space that is being built is not desirable: these spaces are not true workshops, and don't contain flexible space suitable for noise and a wide-range of artistic uses.

Long-term leases and property ownership are considered essential to stability and again, incentives, tax credits and zoning for creative uses were identified as potential solutions to the issue of availability from a development perspective. In addition, many felt that the City should provide a program which allows for vacant or underutilized commercial or City-owned space to be used by creatives; this could be a great first-step to mitigating the availability issue.

Physical Qualities of Ideal Space

*“Developers are pushing upgrades that artists don't want or need.
No granite countertops or bamboo floors required!”*

There was some debate as to whether it is better for creatives to be located throughout the City or to be concentrated in one area: “Maybe I don't want to be stacked in the trenches with artists.” On the whole, however, the creative community finds it important to live and work together in a community setting. This could mean in one shared structure or within a neighborhood. Neighborhoods with transportation, density and beautiful historic buildings – such as Five Points – are an example of the ideal “creative community.” Desiring greater connectivity with buyers and the business community, and shared exhibition space in a central part of Denver is also very important.

Physical characteristics of creative space does not need to be refined; rather amenities should include: large doors, freight elevators, energy efficiency, high ceilings, light, parking, 220-plugs,

ventilation, storage, HVAC, security and plenty of sinks. Space needs to larger than 500 sq/ft with the ability to close a door to conduct work.

Process

“People aren’t aware of resources so they feel as though there are no resources or support.”

The creative community is not aware of a central place to understand the rules and codes that apply to their space. Information is not easy to find and when it is located it seems contradictory. It was suggested that the City provide free workshops on code or identify an ombudsman in the Planning department for the creative community to go to for assistance.

Criteria for space uses seem very restrictive and it is hard for the creative community to insert their concepts into the code regulations. Navigating the process is too complicated and becomes cost prohibitive to creatives who are trying to problem-solve the space issues on their own.

Conclusion

Many participants noted that the best way for them to stabilize their creative profession was to become property owners. In doing so, they seek support in the way of financing, workshops, education and guidance in the purchasing process. “Navigating the bureaucracy” explains both the perception and the barrier.

Throughout the facilitation process, participants offered various solutions to the key issue of space. The ideas and solutions listed below are those that surfaced the most or were most unique to the issue of creative space:

- Use of underutilized space including vacant commercial space, city owned buildings, schools, and office space
- Long-term lease or ownership
- Property taxes relief program
- Formalize arts districts/zones and market them
- Pedestrian-friendly streetscaping in arts districts
- Comprehensive resource guide and space inventory and clearinghouse
- Creative space grants – neighborhoods and artists apply for grants together
- City artists-in-residence programs
- Land bank for future cultural needs
- An **artist center** not an arts center
 - Art Barn <http://www.artbarninc.org/>
 - Torpedo Factory Arts Center <http://www.torpedofactory.org/>
 - Dairy Arts Center <http://www.thedairy.org/>
 - Mattress Factory <http://www.mattress.org/>
- Offer matching loans or grants through “sweat equity” versus traditional equity
- Creative spaces “time share”
- Tax breaks for developers to provide arts space
- Zoning that allows for studios above garages in single-family neighborhoods or residential tax credits for home studios
- City liaison to aid artists who want to develop space
- Funding programs to support collective purchase of space
- Better transportation (or marketing of existing transportation) between “creative neighborhoods”

Again, awareness and marketing was another factor that participants mentioned as it relates to stabilizing their future. Ideas included:

- Art Bus (ex. Englewood)
- Best of Denver bus stops
- Free parking for free cultural days
- Open Studios event

Finally, Mayor Hickenlooper is seen as “sticking to his commitment” to the creative community and many thanked him for establishing the Mayor’s Task Force on Creative Spaces. The energy at the Walnut Foundry that evening was palpable, and the event has generated a significant buzz in the creative community. The creative community was exceptionally pleased at being invited to come together at the Creative Spaces Community Meeting; never before had the creative community been engaged by the City in such a way.

Questions for the Task Force

- 1) What are the three items that you heard at the community meeting or that you read in this report that you think the Task Force should look into?
- 2) Are there any topics or ideas that were brought forward at the meeting that you feel you need additional information from the creative or development community (i.e., a focus group, etc.)
- 3) Given the scope of the items mentioned, do you request presentations or an expert panel on a given topic?
- 4) One person asserted: “Creativity starts at the City.” Very flattering! Based on your own area of expertise and unique perspective on the issue of creative space, can you identify other creative solutions that the Task Force should also consider?