

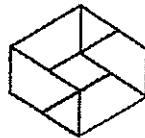
IOWA WEST FOUNDATION

Council Bluffs, Iowa

Findings and Recommendations Arts and Cultural Development for Council Bluffs

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INTRODUCTION

This report to the Iowa West Foundation is a preliminary assessment of needs and opportunities for arts and cultural development in the community.

Two major studies and initiatives supported by IWF have identified cultural development as a top priority. The Downtown Plan (2003) consistently identifies "entertainment, cultural facilities and attractions" as weaknesses of the downtown district, along with the "appearance of the district (downtown)," and lack of marketing. The Mid-America Center Market Study, (October, 2005) which - in focusing on the area around the Mid-America Center - also states that event planners feel Council Bluffs lacks destination appeal and that there is a need for more attractions around the Center. At the same time, that study also points to the low visitation at Council Bluff's historic and cultural destinations.

The Public Art Masterplan, (2005) begins with a vision statement saying in part that, "In 2015, Council Bluffs will be...known for its cultural enlightenment...it will be a community that nurtures an environment in which creativity is ever present in daily life."

These three documents make the case for investment in arts, entertainment, culture and creativity. The case made is economic. However, the educational, human service, and community development reasons to strengthen Council Bluff's arts and culture sector are just as strong.

To assist the Foundation in a preliminary assessment of the opportunities and priorities for developing Council Bluff's arts and cultural sector, ArtsMarket conducted a series of focus groups and interviews with civic and cultural leaders from Council Bluffs and Omaha.

The findings point to the need for planning and leadership to define a series of cultural development goals and strategies. If Council Bluffs is to be the attractive destination, and its downtown the cultural vibrant center as called for in the above plans, short and long term investment will need to be made in planning and providing goal-oriented funding for cultural development.

KEY FINDINGS

Council Bluffs offers an almost unprecedented opportunity for thoughtful cultural development. Its downtown, stretching from the Haymarket to the 100 Block area, includes significant historic structures and has the potential to serve as a unique cultural center. The use of public art to define Bayliss Park and the outstanding architecture of the Library are two major starting points to further opportunities for use of public art and signature architecture for downtown. Existing attractive historic facilities – the International Harvester buildings and the "gym" building, in particular – offer opportunity for major creativity hubs.

Currently, there is no articulated plan that links all of these opportunities and spaces together. At the same time, a number of opportunities have surfaced through the focus groups, based on ArtsMarket's evaluation of the needs and opportunities as well as on best practices from other communities:

1. The Public Art Masterplan has the ability to put Council Bluffs on the map, literally, as a public art destination.
2. Council Bluffs has great cultural institutions ranging from museums to the Mid-America Center, but they are tremendously under-resourced. They arts and cultural institutions need endowments and all need the level of stable annual operating and programming support to build their management and overall operating capacity to better serve the community.
3. The International Harvester buildings could be of a scale to anchor a "Mass MoCa" type of complex that includes live/work space for artists.
4. The area around those buildings, linking to the Haymarket area, could become a culturally vibrant destination.
5. Council Bluffs would greatly benefit from a community arts center with spaces for educational programs, community galleries, and youth after school programs.
6. Council Bluffs has the ability to attract new arts organizations and artist-run complexes, with its lower real estate prices as compared to Omaha.

7. Council Bluff's museums and historical sites are downtown, and could become much more of a destination with significant marketing.
8. New arts and entertainment festivals should be developed, focusing especially on downtown as a destination. Events are as essential as beautification – and are a perfect partner with that initiative – to build community pride.
9. Council Bluffs tourism is casino-driven. Popular, enjoyable, easy entertainment that brings the casino crowd downtown should be a part of the mix to fully obtain the economic benefit of this type of tourism.
10. Council Bluff's K-12 students need the type of career opportunity training, as well as the creative thinking and problem solving skills, that best practice arts education provides.
11. Council Bluffs has the ability to create a community of artists – a strong cultural sector – if it could establish a true arts council and provide the services and forum for communications needed.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Overall, our primary recommendation is to move forward with leadership planning and appropriate projects to support all the above aspects of cultural development. Planning should be mindful of how each element below fits together with the others. Projects should be looked at within the context of an overall strategy for cultural development that realizes maximum benefit for the community economically, socially, in education, and for quality of life.

Through the planning processes, which should balance community dialogue with the use of best models and practices from other communities, the Foundation should determine whether arts and culture should become a focus area for funding, or if cultural development can move forward under the umbrella of the existing focus areas of community development, economic development, social needs and education.

Specific recommendations for each of the 11 points above follow.

Public Art

Creating a density of art around Downtown and the Haymarket will be very important in shaping the "cultural/arts district" feel of the area. It will link downtown and Haymarket, which is important if the two are to merge into a cultural/entertainment zone. Public art gateways, done with lighting, could also be thematic entrances into downtown from the surrounding neighborhoods, inviting people to stroll into the community for dinner or to shop. There should be enough public art in downtown Council Bluffs so that people can – and will want to – take walking tours through the downtown.

The public art plan is a wonderful start for Council Bluff, and if every listed project is implemented within the next 10 years it will have a profound impact on the community and the region. After listening to those interviewed for this document, and after touring the community, it seems as though some of the projects listed could be worth moving to the top of the page to strengthen downtown and Haymarket, namely adding the children's area to the Bayliss Park work, plus the various downtown gateways, the Viaduct and all the Haymarket projects.

Signage is its own kind of public art, though it was not directly addressed by the Public Art Master Plan. It is an important element of creating the "destination brand" for any downtown. Signage could be created to link Downtown's museums and destinations, perhaps invoking the history of the community.

Public art and signage are both important ways to invoke the authentic, the "real" in a community. The rail legacy of Council Bluffs is palpable. So is its agrarian history. Thinking of the rail legacy, one can't help but want to link all the historic sites with public art, making a statement such as Eero Saarinen made with the famous St. Louis Arch and its "gateway to the west" theme. (Of note, the National Park service's model of managing the Arch, the Museum of Westward Expansion, the Old Courthouse, and of linking these with cafes, and an IMAX, is a model that could be replicated as a nonprofit enterprise in Council Bluffs.)



Building Capacity

Council Bluffs needs strong, lively cultural institutions. Mid-America Center needs to be maximized to demonstrate a return for the community. The Library, Union Pacific Museum, and Western Historic Trails are the community's strongest cultural/arts institutions, most able to program and do the level of marketing necessary to win an audience. The Dodge House, as well as the other historic homes, the Squirrel Cage Jail, and the Rails West Railroad Museum, as well as Chanticleer, the Arts Center and the Arts Council, are not able to take any risks or do any prospecting for new audiences. Their annual operating budgets are too small to support the level of staff they need to make the most of their organizations. They can't do the education, outreach, new programs, tourism-oriented marketing, or downtown 'destination' development needed to really be vital.

There are at least five ways to contemplate strengthening the capacity of these organizations. The first is specific to the Mid America Center: for it to be able to build a niche market in programming and win consistent visibility, it has to be able to have the resources to book shows with no risk by fully paying artist fees. This way, it can lock in artists so they don't migrate to the Quest Center or to the casinos at the last minute, something that has routinely happened. By locking in artists that fit a brand profile for the Center, it will build and hold onto the market share

Council Bluffs needs to stimulate the rest of a cultural and entertainment infrastructure.

The remainder of capacity building mechanisms focus on the cultural/arts institutions. One mechanism that could be useful would be to provide annual operating support in a multi-year program that works with the organizations to build their own ability to match and eventually replaced the annual operating funds with other contributions and/or earned income. The second is to help these institutions build endowments that will eventually provide enough funding to meet the operating costs of full time staff. A third is to develop a joint program for marketing and for education. The organizations' leaders were skeptical about the feasibility of a joint marketing program, but were more enthusiastic about a joint education specialist who could assist all their organizations in building and operating viable K-12 learning opportunities. Joint marketing would work with these organizations, but they may need to see the functionality of it by starting with something less threatening, such as the education position.

In the long term, these organizations need endowments. The Foundation can uniquely ask the question: "What will it take for Council Bluffs' cultural organizations to be here in 50 years? In 100 years?" Absent endowments, the organizations will live hand to mouth, and some, such as Chanticleer, will live from volunteer to volunteer.

Chanticleer is a good case study for endowment development. It has a tremendously loyal volunteer team that keeps it running. But by its own admission, the organization lacks the ability to do the kind of educational work it wants to offer, particularly to high school students in Council Bluffs. The organization wants to offer everything from acting to set construction – programs that in other communities have been proven to help steer youth into film/media/creative industries professions. Raleigh Little Theatre is a good example of a community theatre that has developed a strong education program:

Raleigh Little Theatre's Education Program is dedicated to providing high quality theatre arts instruction in a safe, nurturing environment. Theatre training promotes self-esteem, builds confidence, stimulates creativity, sharpens communication skills and fosters an appreciation of teamwork. Our mission is to encourage each student to explore creative possibilities and celebrate his or her own uniqueness in a non-competitive atmosphere of fun.

Without staff, such programs are impossible to consistently offer. Because of its loyal following, it is possible – a stretch, but possible – that this organization could meet matching demands and work to build an endowment that would allow it to have a staff and run this kind of program.

The International Harvester Buildings and Artist District, New Architecture

A complex of buildings such as this is almost too good to be true. Omaha has Bemis, HotShops, and Saddle Creek's upcoming complex. But there is evidently not enough affordable artist live/work space, and with the growing arts/creativity community in the Midlands, these buildings could become a center – the real home – for a thriving artist community. Both Peekskill and Troy, New York, for example, have built "artist districts."

The scale of these buildings even suggest a venture as interesting as the Mass MoCa complex in North Adams, Massachusetts, albeit smaller. (Mass MoCa has 300,000 square feet of space.) In addition to visual arts and to serving as landlord to numerous high tech creativity businesses, Mass MoCa offers an extensive entertainment and performing arts program, and it has an outdoor cinema with a 50 foot wide movie screen, plus two outdoor performance courtyards. The complex includes a café, and a new small boutique hotel has opened across the street.

Mass MoCa has changed North Adams from its old factory days to being a home for many small creativity businesses. The factory district around it has become the new cool area for start up firms. This is possible in Council Bluffs.



The Chicago artist district is a good example of what could be created in the Haymarket area. By establishing a district for artists, with affordable live/work loft spaces, it has created a standing community. Many of the artists own their spaces, while others rent at below market rates.

The Chicago Arts District is an approximately 12 square block area on Chicago's near Southwest side, located around the intersection of South Halsted and 18th Street. The neighborhood spreads East and West of the Dan Ryan Expressway, and reaches from 16th Street, on the North, to approximately Canalport on the South. By car, the Chicago Arts District neighborhood is only about five minutes from the Chicago Loop.

The neighborhood has provided a home and work space for hundreds of artists each year, over the past four decades. Established artists, sculptors, ceramicists, photographers, performance artists as well as individuals teaching in the arts have all thrived here. Many have said that this is where their best work was achieved.

This artist community is characterized by open loft spaces with lots of light. Rather than facing out onto busy streets, most of these artist lofts face inward onto tranquil open garden spaces that are conducive to building a sense of community, while helping enable the creative process.

An evaluation of the feasibility of transforming the Harvester buildings into artist live/work space needs to be done. It should be done in the context of a larger analysis of the Haymarket area as home to many artists, and as a vital arts/creativity district.

One model for the district that may be too commercial – or may be just right – is Granville Island, Vancouver. It too is under a viaduct, and was developed from a group of very decrepit buildings. It combines for-profit and nonprofit, and has worked to offer a wide range of entertainment. Resident organizations include a culinary institute and a farmers' market that is open daily and has become one of the most successful such markets in North America. Restaurants abound, and there is and a boutique hotel. Granville has turned the "under the viaduct" area of Vancouver into one of its most dynamic neighborhoods.



Architecture could be another important distinguishing element of downtown Council Bluffs as well as the Haymarket area. (The library is an exciting model of outstanding design, and the beautification program certainly is creating an aesthetic of excellent design.) Outstanding contemporary architecture, along with historic preservation of buildings such as the Harvester complex, create a breathtaking new image and self identity for communities that were largely built out a century ago. An exciting mix of new design along side historic warehouse buildings creates its own kind of destination. Columbus, Indiana put itself on the international map by bringing world-renowned architects to town to design community buildings. Today, it is one of the best rated architectural destinations in America.

There may be opportunities to bring outstanding architecture to the planned social service campus. And, the Haymarket area could become a center for new small-scale development demonstrating exciting architecture, mixed in with the historic buildings. For example, the photo here is of one of ten artist housing units developed for the Montalvo (San Francisco) artist colony, which sit along side the historic headquarters building there.



Arts Center

The void of an arts center is immediately evident to any arts-focused visitor to Council Bluffs. Based on the interviews and focus groups, it is equally as evident to the artists who live in the community and the residents who seek arts education programs for themselves or their children. There is no space for the kind of vital after school programs that meet the needs of at risk youth. And, there is no community gallery, no place for amateur artists to show their work. Perhaps most importantly, arts centers today provide workforce training for young people: as jobs are becoming more creativity based, there is a tremendous need for training to match. Schools aren't offering it. Arts Centers can.

The need for a culturally competent workforce for the 21st century is the compelling idea behind Arts Street. This year-round arts-based youth employment program demonstrates to young adults the critical relationship between education and work. Using hands-on experiences, core academics, studio art processes, up-to-date technology, and all of the arts disciplines, inner-city Denver youth ages 14-21 are given a chance to discover how their creativity can lead to a career. Arts Street begins with art classes taught by professional artists. The program then progresses to Entrepreneurial Art Business training, where youth acquire basic business and industry skills, such as marketing, branding, and inventory and financial management.

Attracting New Artists and Arts Organizations

Council Bluffs needs artists and arts organizations as a part of its economic, community, and educational redevelopment. Their presence will make the community's downtown vital, and they will be a powerful force in education and community service. They are the engine that will drive the entertainment development of downtown.

Some are out there. Some came to the focus groups and noted they'd much rather be working in Iowa, their home, than across the river in Omaha. But their numbers, right now, are few. They don't know each other. They haven't formed an artists' community. They want to be a community development force, but they don't know how to become a known presence. Those that do live in the community believe Council Bluffs could win many more artists, with the right organized incentives.

Just as communities recruit businesses to locate, offering special incentives, Council Bluffs needs to recruit artists and arts organizations to impact its community development. Providence is most famous for what it did to recruit artists into its downtown, and set the model for many other communities. In Providence, the establishment of an artist tax-free district mechanism – no sales tax, no state income tax – has revitalized a number of neighborhoods as well as the downtown area.

State Legislation enabled the creation of the Artist Tax Free District for Sales & Use and State Income Tax in the Valley, Olneyville and West Broadway neighborhoods. The Artist Tax Exemption Bill provides relief from Sales & Use Tax and State Income Tax to artists that live and work within the boundaries of the district. The West Side Arts District is inline with the current demographics of the artist community in Providence and located in neighborhoods where economic revitalization is ongoing through the direct impact and vision of the arts community.

Other communities have recruited nonprofit arts organizations to "move over" from their urban locations. Covington, KY has been actively recruiting nonprofit organizations from Cincinnati, offering low interest or no interest loans for facility development. Covington has also recently established two arts districts and is competing to win residents and creativity businesses from Cincinnati to "move over." It seeks to be the incubator hub for smaller creativity businesses and to develop its downtown historic residential districts. It has established a Covington Arts and Technology Zone as well as an Artists Residential District, and is marketing both with numerous incentives.

Destination Marketing

As noted earlier in this report, Council Bluffs cultural destinations lack the funds and personnel to market themselves. They have also suffered doubly by the loss of the marketing grants that had been available from the CVB, and by the loss of the CVB marketing. Cultural organizations always attract only a small portion of the visitors to larger attractions such as Casinos, but without marketing funds to create visibility and destination brands, they become nearly invisible.

When confronted with the issue of marketing, the leaders of Council Bluffs cultural organizations first noted the lack of CVB grants as a primary issue to address. When asked if they could agree to a joint marketing initiative, many were skeptical and noted that they haven't been able to affect a positive consortium approach with the CVB. They are also wary of the time it takes them to translate their marketing message to another party. Their negative history will require some joint planning and development of a marketing method that works for all of them. They need to see that joint marketing can work, and that together they can create a destination cultural brand for Council Bluffs.

They need funding, planning, and an entity to manage the marketing. In other communities, it would be the job of an arts council. In Council Bluffs, the arts council is essentially an events management group, running civic events that would more typically be run by a downtown association, or a city office of special events. To take on marketing, this arts council would need to expand its mission and run events as a subsidiary function. Other options include establishing a new arts council that can provide umbrella services such as marketing and, as noted above, an education program. A third alternative is for the CVB to establish an on-going cultural destination marketing function.

Arts and Entertainment Festivals

Perhaps the major reason cities undertake annual arts and entertainment festivals is the economic and social benefit received. Downtowns gain image and direct economic benefit.

Festivals constantly need to be refreshed and updated, and new festivals need to be created. The Arts Council plans to update the Renaissance Faire this year, but admits that the location, plus many of the weather issues it has faced have worked against it in recent years. Its other festivals are more community-building than arts or entertainment in orientation - i.e. Festival of Trees - and aren't of the scale to attract tourists and visitors from throughout the region. These festivals should likely continue, but should be viewed as civic events, not as cultural destination-builders

It would be useful to do some pro-active arts festival planning in the context of major destination development for Council Bluffs. In that context, it would be useful to consider popular entertainment festivals that could speak to the existing tourism base and potentially use the Mid America Center as the hub venue. If Amana can host an annual Cajun and Zydeco Fest (May each year), what can Council Bluffs do to offer popular fare that is appealing to residents and the busloads of tourists that come? How could a festival fill and spill out of the Mid America Center into the surrounding neighborhood, and eventually help shape its personality? Such festivals need capital and significant marketing, but the return on investment can be huge.

On a practical side, the issue of festival management should be evaluated. Victor Gutman's firm, which manages the Renaissance Faire, manages most of the Omaha festivals and many in other cities, as well. Perhaps there needs to be mutually agreed-upon benchmarks or indicators of success to hold that firm to in managing the Faire.

And, the discussion once more needs to return to the Arts Council and its role. Based on the roundtable discussion, it appears that the Arts Council staff and board understand that festivals have so dominated their work that there is no time or capacity left to take on the much larger cultural development leadership tasks. Some planning and consultation to this organization might help them sort through whether the Council itself should remain the festival agency and at the same time broaden its mission to do more, or if there should be a civic festivals entity within the City, as is common elsewhere.

Popular Entertainment

From discussions with civic leaders and review of documents, it is clear that Council Bluffs seeks a spill over effect from the casinos and Mid America Center, of people coming downtown for more entertainment and cultural enjoyment. The reality is that popular entertainment needs to be in place to bring them into downtown even if the Harvester complex and surrounding areas become arts-rich. Granville Island once again is a good model: the concept of culture has to be broadly defined to include lots of accessible entertainment. Downtown movie theatres are a part of the solution for many communities. So are popular entertainment venues with live performances – bands, comedians.

K-12 Education

This report has already touched on the need for after-school programs and for Council Bluffs' cultural organizations to provide educational programs. As focus group participants noted, there is a dearth of local history taught in the Council Bluffs schools, and the fine arts programs are a fraction of what they used to be. Clearly, the existing cultural institutions plus new (an arts center) could do much to remedy this.

Arts education does more than teach the arts. It teaches the increasingly important job skills of creative thinking and problem solving, and provides real career grounding for many jobs ranging from technical (carpentry, for example) to high tech (software development).

The lack of artists in the community, and of artist residencies in the Council Bluffs schools, hurts Council Bluffs' K-12 education. If/when the Harvester complex or other buildings become artist live/work space, it would be valuable to establish residency artist programs with stipends for various artists to work in the Council Bluffs schools.

While it is important to do as much as possible culturally that is uniquely Council Bluffs, arts education is one area where leaning on the best practices from across the river may be wise. Nebraska has one of the finest arts education teacher professional development programs in the nation, Prairie Visions. (Nebraska State Arts Council). The Joslyn and Omaha Symphony, as well as the Bemis, offer outstanding education opportunities. Developing a plan to link all of these to the Council Bluffs schools could be expedient and have a profound impact on local education.

Arts Council: Cultural Development Council

As stated throughout this report, Council Bluffs has many cultural development needs that could and possibly should be managed by an arts council, or, better termed, a Cultural Development Council. From the interviews and round tables, it appears that the Council is receptive, but in need of considerable guidance. There is not much knowledge of what best practice arts councils do, likely because there isn't a good model anywhere nearby. (Omaha doesn't have an arts council.)

With resources, staffing, training, and planning, it is possible that Council Bluffs' arts council could become a valuable partner with the Foundation in stewarding cultural development for the community. The board needs to develop a vision and enthusiasm, and the organization as a whole needs to believe there are opportunities and resources. (There is a real sense of fatigue and burn-out, at present.)

Conclusion

Council Bluffs has the opportunity to reinvigorate itself as a community through cultural development. The points addressed above are the priorities that appear most pressing and to offer the greatest economic, social, and educational benefit, and combined form great opportunities for Council Bluffs.

There are many more details to add to the list of recommended cultural development steps, from incentive programs for adaptive reuse of historic buildings to effective arts programming in the Council Bluffs parks, technical assistance for artists who want to start arts businesses and partnerships with organizations that can bring valuable arts programs from Omaha and elsewhere in Iowa to Council Bluffs. As planning for the above moves forward, many of these additional opportunities and mechanisms will emerge.

INTERVIEWS AND ROUNDTABLE PARTICIPANTS

Todd Graham, Executive Director, Iowa West Foundation
Rich Sorich, Special Project Director, Iowa West Foundation
Jerry Mathiasen, Associate Director, Iowa West Foundation
Reed Morgan, Grants Program Manager, Iowa West Foundation
Mayor Tom Hanafan, City of Council Bluffs
Bob Mundt, CEO, Council Bluffs Chamber of Commerce
Jeff Davis, founder of Playing with Fire
David Catalan, CEO, Nonprofit Association of the Midlands
Karen Levin, Nebraska Cultural Endowment
Spencer Crews, CEO, Omaha Botanical Gardens
Mark Bousouka, Bemis Center for Contemporary Art
Lynn Friesner, Council Bluffs Public Library
Steve Langan, poet
Marcia Joffee-Bouska, artist
KC Collins Hummel, Executive Director, Western Trails Historic Center
Laura Luger, Marketing Director, Playing with Fire
Wayne Anderson, Council Bluffs Historic Preservation Alliance
Laural Ronk, Executive Director, Council Bluffs Arts Council
Jody Boyer, Artist
Russ Freeman, Artist
Leslie Southard, Renaissance Faire of the Midlands
Beth Lindquist, Director Union-Pacific Museum
Bob Putnam, Executive Director, Chanticleer Theatre
Ron Hopp, Director Council Bluffs Parks and Recreation Department
Kori Nielsen, Executive Director, Historic General Dodge House
Bonnie Brummer, Director, Southwest Iowa Arts Center at IWCC
Charlie Schilling, General Manager, Mid America Center