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VOELZ CHANDLER: Civic Center ripe for conversations

By Mary Voelz Chandler, Rocky Mountain News
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If you designed a Denver Cultural Center to place in the old Carnegie Library in Civic Center, what would you want it to be?

A place with easy access? Free and low-cost programming? Gallery space and studios? Open to political and educational opportunities, concerts, lectures and plays? Even, yes, weddings?

And: Does it even belong there?

In the continuing discussion over the wisdom and practicality of placing new institutions in Civic Center, the Denver Office of Cultural Affairs opened its series of programs this week with talks by heads of cultural centers around the country.

Meanwhile, more opportunities to discuss whether the Colorado Historical Society should move to Civic Center now also are on the fall calendar, including several sponsored by the city of Denver.

The cultural center presentation showed how different such programs can be:

- **Matt Nielsen**, deputy commissioner of the Chicago Department of Cultural Affairs, operates a mammoth operation in the former Chicago main library. Through a network of arts organizations, and other venues (think Millennium Park), the agency believes "a center must be bigger than the building itself."
- **Wier Harman**, executive director of Town Hall Seattle, oversees activities in a 1908 former Christian Science church. He sells memberships (not subscriptions) and rents space, partners with presenters and does his own presenting. This is low-cost culture, played out in two small theaters. "We're a comfortable place, not a glitzy cultural center."
- **Scott Ward**, executive director of the Armory Center for the Arts in Pasadena, operates busy education and exhibition programs in a WPA-vintage National Guard armory. It's all about partnerships and flexibility, he said. The mission is simple: "the power of art to transform the lives of people in the community."

How this might fly in Denver is yet to be determined. "It's the beginning of a conversation," said Erin Trapp, director of the Denver Office of Cultural Affairs.

As for the panelists' thoughts on Civic Center as a site for a cultural center, variety ruled. "There's a natural coalescence of energy around the park, though not in it yet," said Harman, adding "I'm reluctant to endorse cultural ghettos."

"Set a clear set of expectations," noted Ward.

Nielson said he thought the city should put Colfax Avenue underground, along with revenue-generating parking, "and get an incredible public square."

I write that paragraph with hesitation, since it is so counter to a sensible design approach. But it's the kind of suggestion city officials will hear during this process.

The next program in this series is about how technology can play a role. Or, as cultural affairs director Erin Trapp said: "How you push the concept of a cultural center in a digital age."

That made the response by Ward even more telling: When asked about the role of social media in his programming, he said that students there are asking for sewing machines, drawing courses, knitting and other low-tech activities because they already are immersed in technology.

Even as this series is beginning, two new efforts now are weighing in on what to do with Civic Center. Some members of Capitol Hill United Neighborhoods (CHUN) and others have formed the Coalition to Save Civic Center. Meanwhile, city officials, spearheaded by Denver City Councilwoman Jeanne Robb, are looking to form a "civic discussion" of the historical society's proposal.

The Coalition's mission statement calls the proposal for a new building "unacceptable," since it "constitutes a significant diminishment of the open space and park environment of Civic Center Park." Members urge the Denver City Council to oppose the plan.

They also want a real conversation, with opponents on equal footing with proponents. Thus was born a meeting Monday night sponsored by CHUN and other neighborhood groups.

As for the "civic discussion" group, this is what I would call an effort to get more concrete answers on how the park and other sites might fit into the society's plans. And it's coming from the city, which needs answers just like its citizens.

The meetings, which begin weekly on Sept. 24, include topics such as the city's future space needs (as in whether the Permit Center), the role of the cultural center, and pros and cons of the society moving into Civic Center vs. the Permit Center.

"My goal is to have more of a conversation," not in "a heavily controlled environment," said Robb, who speaks for many when she asks for a more open setting in which to share ideas.

After all, the *fait accompli* approach just doesn't work when it comes to Civic Center.

Save more dates

- **Denver Office of Cultural Affairs:** public meetings on a new Denver Cultural Center; 4 to 6 p.m. Monday and Sept. 25, The Cable Center, 2000 Buchtel Blvd. (Also taped for broadcast on Denver's Channel 8.)
- **Capitol Hill United Neighborhoods:** public assembly to discuss the potential move of the Colorado Historical Society into Civic Center, 6 p.m. Monday, Colorado Historical Society, 1300 Broadway
- **Colorado Historical Society:** Meetings on that same topic, 10 to 11:30 Sept. 26 and Oct. 24, and 6 to 7:30 p.m. Oct. 2, Colorado Historical Society, 1300 Broadway
- **A Civic Conversation:** City-organized discussions of that same topic, all 8 to 9:30 a.m., Sept. 24 and Oct. 1, 8 and 15 (and possibly 29), Law Library, City and County Building, 1437 Bannock St.

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