

[The University, Liberal Arts, and The City](#)

Published by [Dean Saitta](#) November 7th, 2006 in [Prez's Pulpit](#).

The October 27, 2006 Provost's Conference on "The University of Denver and The City" provided a wonderful opportunity to prospect for ways that DU could partner with Denver city government to address significant urban problems. The proceedings didn't disappoint. Presentations by city officials in the areas of safety, education, homelessness, and economic development were quite informative and suggested numerous possibilities for student service learning and scholarly research. Civic commitments to respecting historical and cultural values, sustainable development, and social justice were among those on display, all of which dovetail with DU's mission to serve the public good.

I listened to the proceedings as Co-Chair of the UPAC Task Force on Mission and Goals, which is charged with refining our goals in advance of the upcoming endowment campaign. I was interested in identifying some themes that could be woven into revised learning and scholarship goals sensitive to cultivating civic literacy and "daring" research collaborations. Issues around homelessness and education clearly resonated with many conference attendees. Our professional schools are already well-positioned to tackle these issues, and there will be much more discussion of the form that the DU-City collaboration will take in the next 100 days. But I was more excited by another challenge that might appeal to those of us located in the traditional liberal arts. This is the challenge of working for the *cultural sustainability* of urban forms.

Thoughts in this direction were triggered by John Huggins, Executive Director of the Denver Office of Economic Development. In his conference talk Mr. Huggins noted that Denver has "a history of civic determination and cultural inclusiveness". In one of the few moments that elicited spontaneous applause from the audience, he also described immigration to the city as an "asset" rather than a problem. This got me wondering how much these claims and ideals are reflected in practice, given that Denver is experiencing some of the same problems as other American cities: gentrification, middle-class flight to exurbs, and inner city social bifurcation into rich and poor, among others. Investments in cultural tourism has emerged as a leading way that cities are revitalizing life in urban cores, but this has opened up other debates about the accessibility of revitalized spaces for a variety of minority and subaltern groups. These debates are clearly at play in Denver, many inspired by such developments as completion of the Libeskind-designed wing of the Denver Art Museum, the appearance of new proposals to rehabilitate the Civic Center and Union Station areas, and the continuing maturation of various New Urbanist housing projects designed to mix ethnic and income groups.

The key question is whether these developments will produce a more culturally-inclusive city or, alternatively, simply reproduce old patterns of exclusion in new forms. Will Denver's renewed art museum and other features of the Cultural Complex encourage use by a multiplicity of groups on other than "free days"? Will redesigned public spaces enhance democratic interactions "on the street" and help create a common civic purpose that transcends loyalty to the local professional football team? How might other spaces

and cultural institutions be revitalized, designed, and located so as to serve this common good? These and other questions invite discussion across a variety of disciplines including, at the very least, geography, art, and anthropology.

The university has recently enhanced its reputation as an institution that serves the public good by sponsoring a [Colorado Economic Futures Panel](#). What if we imagine the formation of a Colorado *Cultural* Futures panel to investigate cultural sustainability in the context of the myriad challenges facing great—and wannabe great—American cities and their hinterlands? This seems like an idea worth considering as our partnership with the city of Denver deepens and matures in the months ahead.