



Columbia seeks inspiration

Denver art curator tapped to focus, guide development of city's downtown

by a sun reporter

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Specialist focuses on art, culture

When a developer decided to build Belmar, a mini-new town five miles west of Denver, one of the first people he called was curator Adam Lerner.

The development, by Continuum Partners, would have about 1,200 homes, offices and shops. But the company knew it took more than those to create what it calls a sustainable community.

That is where Lerner came in.

Lerner was a master teacher for modern and contemporary art at the Denver Art Museum, former curator of the Contemporary Museum in Baltimore and a student of the relationship between art and the public.

And art and culture are key ingredients in making a community whole, he says.

Today, the "soul" of Belmar is not the shops and offices, but The Laboratory of Arts and Ideas at Belmar, which Lerner founded two years ago and where he serves as executive director.

It is not surprising, then, that General Growth Properties Inc. tapped Lerner as part of the company's plans to convert downtown Columbia into an urban center, especially since the public for more than a year has demanded that the plan provide expanded arts and cultural venues.

He met Thursday with students at River Hill High School in Clarksville and that evening spoke at Howard Community College as part of a series of GGP-sponsored lectures on urban design and life.

"When you are creating a new civic center, I am interested in how art can be relevant to civic life," says Lerner.

"I think the first step any developer thinks of is, 'How do we create a space that is real -- that is authentic?' But the second step is, 'How do we create elements that are ideal?' Ideal spaces are like museums and churches.

"I do not have a planning background," adds Lerner, who as a doctoral student at the Johns Hopkins University wrote his dissertation on early 20th-century American monuments, emphasizing the career of Gutzon Borglum, the sculptor of Mount Rushmore. "Basically, I was a museum curator who was brought into a planning site, and the reason they brought me in is that the developers believed that culture was a part of the long-term sustainability of that community."

What may be surprising, though, is that Lerner's definition of art goes far beyond paintings, sculptures, and play and music houses.

Indeed, energy and interaction are at the heart of his theory about quality urban life.

"Art is not just a physical object but also ideas -- conversations about the big questions in life," he says. "Art creates the backdrop for people to interact with each other. Bringing people together."

Thus, he says, The Laboratory at Belmar is unique in that it "combines elements of an art museum with a think tank and a public forum, so we have not just international art exhibitions but also dynamic lecturers, workshops, performances and public programs. The intention is that it is an alternative to the traditional art museum that provides the public with an opportunity to engage directly with artists and scholars in a spirit of experimentation and public dialogue."

The current plan for downtown Columbia, developed by the Department of Planning and Zoning, would, among other things, allow 5,500 additional housing units, 3 million square feet of new commercial offices and 750,000 square feet for retail.

The county is expected to release a revised plan early this year, perhaps this month. And GGP has said it will reveal its plan in early April.

The public has consistently said it expects developers to provide art and cultural venues in return for gaining density.

But Lerner cautions Columbia to neither define art too narrowly nor attempt to mimic Belmar.

"There is no answer to what makes a successful community," he says. "It always depends on the specific site, and you have to be responsive to that place. The questions here are what are the resources in Columbia? How do we build upon that? How do we look at what the site demands? What are the environment demands? What are the commitments of the people who are living here?"

"I am very much opposed to the idea that to make a good city center what you need is an art institution. ... I actually think that sometimes it is most appropriate to have a really fantastic recreational center. Maybe what it means is to integrate a really great educational center. ... It depends on the location."

As people consider plans for downtown Columbia, he says, they should examine "what are the ingredients that make up a vital civic life, and then how does art fit into that?"

"What is an idea for a healthy, civic community, and can we use this opportunity to create a culturally energized [center]? To me, that is not just thinking about immediate needs but also thinking about big issues of our civilization," he said. "Art is only one solution to a site, but it is part of a broader network."

That approach in Belmar, Lerner says, has succeeded in changing "migratory patterns. We have gotten people who were used to going only to the downtown Denver area for culture to now go out to the suburbs for culture, which is extraordinary."

Up to 65 percent of the visitors to The Laboratory at Belmar, he says, come from downtown Denver, and about 57 percent are repeat visitors.

While Lerner says it is up to the community to decide what is appropriate for Columbia, he says it has the opportunity to "create this dynamic energy."

"What we have done is reinvigorated the spirit of inquiry, and that is to me what I think about when I think of art and culture. I think about the spirit of inquiry, the spirit of sharing ideas."