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As a relative newcomer to Calgary, I have experienced the region with the antennae of the traveler; I have not had the luxury (and perhaps the perceptual constraint) of living here for a long period. Just as one moves through a new city on a holiday and marvels at various positive and negative elements that the residents have come to take for granted, thus have I spent my first year in Calgary absorbing the fabric of this community.

My focus is on cultural disciplines, I pay closer attention to spheres of activity that one typically associates with the arts and related areas of cultural functioning. In many discussions within the city and province over the last fifteen months, I have been struck with the degree of attention to questions surrounding the enhancement of cultural elements in our city. The projections for Calgary's community economic and social development over the next decade are that this region will experience unprecedented growth, and the interest in arts and culture can only intensify as the population base grows and the city develops enhanced social and professional connections on a global scale. Many have observed that our community is at the "tipping point" of progress, and that an exponential increase in cultural components is necessary and desirable for the area to evolve to the proverbial next level.

There is a strong collective intuition here that the arts and other cultural endeavors need vigorous encouragement, and that the expansion of these elements is integral to a vibrant and remarkable place to live. Yet, there are those who tell me that Calgary is fundamentally a cautious community that may not be able to gracefully advance with regard to the range of contemporary arts, design, and architecture. I hear this quite often, and I disagree with such claims. My anecdotal experience, admittedly that of a new resident, has been one of encouragement for intrepid thinking and daring initiatives from virtually all quarters, and a nearly constant admonishment to think higher and deeper.

When faced with a sense of need, many communities and organizations will gravitate toward extended planning processes; our intuitive realization of a need does not provide us with specific actions, and communities need to be wise in designing concrete strategies to achieve desired circumstances. I have begun to think about the optimal balance between planning and doing, between thinking about a direction versus taking informed steps toward the goal while deeper plans are evolving against an established vision. In some respects Alberta College of Art & Design is a fine analogy for our community; as a college, there is a history of triumph, yet there is a desire within the institution to chart a future that is every bit as energetic as our past. We have recently begun a deep strategic planning process that holds promise for charting our future, and we could elect to wait for a comprehensive silver bullet concept that might emerge from our planning. Notwithstanding, we can also move forward

with tactical initiatives that begin to move us down the road toward our goals. In 2004 I recommended to the ACAD Board of Governors that they adopt an expansive new vision for the college; in September of that year, the Board adopted a statement that stipulates that ACAD will operate “in a laboratory environment that is committed to unconstrained inquiry” versus an atmosphere that is less courageous and more commonplace. This vision is hardly the stance of representatives of a timid community.

My belief is that embracing the laboratory model may result in a more open, fluid-state environment for our institution; imagine what might occur if our members (including students) operated fully as colleagues on an expedition of discovery in a setting in which astute risks were celebrated. Such an environment would mean that we would engage in deeds that would facilitate the realization of our ultimate vision, learning from our successes as well as our missteps. Our first major venture to emerge from this mindset has been our Stirling Culture series; almost 800 people attended the presentation by our initial speaker, Tim Rollins, and the community discussion that has followed that event has been brisk. Our second speaker, Anna Deveare Smith, abruptly canceled her lecture to appear on the Oprah Winfrey show instead, prompting dialogue about what that choice implies about “popular” culture versus a more intense conversation; I hope that her cancellation becomes an extra ingredient for discussing the ideas posed by our Stirling Culture experiment.

Calgary is primed to make important choices about culture and the meaning of this community. Planning and research are critical to judicious choices for our future, however our work must factor in imminent opportunities as well as the vision and values of the population. What might we achieve if we settle for nothing less than preeminence rather than parity with other places, enterprising routes rather than more mundane (and less promising) paths, and acting on our plucky ethos? The notion of ‘Laboratory Calgary’ might imply a celebrated exploration, a collective leap; nothing could be more disquieting, or more promising, for our lives as Calgarians.