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Lance Carlson, President + CEO, Alberta College of Art + Design

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A hill is an excellent vantage point from which to survey things. From our lofty position in the city's northwest, we at the Alberta College of Art + Design have come to several significant conclusions about our evolution as an institution and the role we wish to play in the community.

Fittingly, these are summed up in the vision statement we produced in 2004. In that document we foresee ACAD being “a pre-eminent catalyst institution for cultural development locally, provincially, nationally and internationally.” By “catalyst institution” we mean one that seeks to develop what we know, what we think, and how we move through the world.

In turn, this vision led to a new government mandate for the college, one that affirms our unique status as “the only post-secondary institution in the prairie provinces devoted exclusively to advanced education, practice and research in visual culture, design and associated and emergent fields.”

With these new guideposts for its future, ACAD recommitted itself to its students, faculty and to Calgary. And that taught us certain things about our present situation. Just as a hill can give you a broad overview, it can also isolate you from the larger community. Given our new vision and mandate, it is time for ACAD to come down from the hill.

Over the last few years, we have been studying how we might best meet these new objectives. The inescapable conclusions are that ACAD needs a permanent building and that building needs to be in the heart of the city. In spite of the advantages of our present facility, which we lease from SAIT, we must plan for the future of ACAD.

Our current building was built in 1973 to accommodate 700 students. Our current enrolment is 1150, and over the next 10 years we plan to increase that to over 1,500. Obviously this creates a certain urgency, but there are larger issues that also make this an auspicious time for the College to move downtown. In our world, designers and artists are no longer solely engaged in creating discrete objects. Increasingly, creative thought and design methods are being applied to systems—everything from health care to transportation and community development—as a means of tackling the most vexing contemporary problems; practitioners of art and design are intimately engaged with their communities like

never before.

These ideas form the heart of our Stirring Culture speaker series. The first series, subtitled Arts, Imagination and Community, spanned the 2005-2006 academic year. In keeping with our vision, the free events were held not on campus but at the Jack Singer Concert Hall. That first series struck a chord with some 5,000 Albertans who were eager to engage with these ideas.

The current series—Stirring Culture 2: A Time to Act—concludes May 12 with a presentation by Richard Florida, one of the world's leading thinkers on issues of economic competitiveness and how it is influenced by cultural innovations and the arts. Stirring Culture showed Calgarians the myriad ways in which the creative process is being applied to endeavours far outside traditional areas of creative practice. None of this is possible, however, if artists and designers are not engaged in a dialogue with the community. That's where our new building comes in. Any kind of separation between artists and designers and their community flies in the face of what we know about these fields and about how they should be taught. In order to produce value and relevance, artists and designers must be engaged with their surroundings, with cultural and aesthetic debates. The same is true of art and design schools.

Last year, ACAD presented its business case to the provincial government, seeking more than 500,000 square feet of new space in central Calgary, the amount of which was determined via a rigorous architectural programming study. This new building seeks to be a focal point for the community. We envision it being a place where our students mix with the larger community. A new campus would offer new galleries, a retail art/design component, extension courses, and meeting rooms that could be used by community groups, and an arts library that could be used by students and the general public.

In its response, the government did not bicker with any part of our vision. It merely said that it felt we could get by with 490,000 square feet in a new facility, something that we feel we can manage.

That facility would also include amenities like coffee shops and opportunities to watch artists at work. In short, it would be a place for students and the public, a place of mingling and experimentation. Every day, thousands of people would interact with ACAD faculty and staff, making the new campus a community within a community.

Ultimately it would be an asset to the city and play an important role in Calgary's future. We know that art, design, and education are powerful drivers of economic development, that the highly skilled and creative workers demanded by knowledge industries want not only stimulating jobs but also invigorating cities in which to live.

For more than 80 years, ACAD has been educating some of Canada's most potent designers, artists and cultural producers. Our graduates and faculty have made vast contributions to this city. Now we are charting a course as an institution that makes a difference, an institution that supports and leads the development of culture and innovation.

In order to accomplish this, ACAD needs to physically be in the community. That, ultimately, is the path to our vision.

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