THE NORTHERN PLAINS CULTURAL CENTER AT NDSU

A VISION PAPER

Presented by

The Cultural Center Task Force

North Dakota State University

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OVERVIEW

The following conceptual framework for a new cultural arts center at North Dakota State University is the first phase of a two-part proposal. This initial phase will describe the task force's consensus about the mission, guiding principles, practical applications, and physical nature of the facility.

The second phase of the proposal will specify in greater detail such aspects as site options, suggested floor plan, square footage, estimated costs, administrative structure, and funding sources.

The task force believes that reaching a clear understanding of and agreement about the fundamental purpose of the proposed cultural center is essential before considering specific questions of implementation and resources.

THE MISSION

The primary mission of the Northern Plains Cultural Center at NDSU is to collect, document, study, preserve, exhibit, and interpret materials associated with the diverse cultures of the northern plains.* The Cultural Center, as it celebrates the contributions of many peoples to the common good, serves to expose the public to the cultural riches of this complex region.

THE PRINCIPLES

In accordance with the traditions of a land-grant university, the Northern Plains Cultural Center at NDSU is committed to the ideals of (1) fostering a broad, democratic definition of the arts and associated cultural materials that display our plains heritage; (2) representing an inclusive picture of the cultural groups which form the traditions and lifestyles of the region; (3) educating a multiplicity of publics through wide outreach options; and (4) fulfilling the land-grant university's three essential roles of teaching, research, and service.

* While the Cultural Center will be located in North Dakota, roughly in the center of the northern plains, the task force defines this region as spanning a geographical area which includes North Dakota, South Dakota, Minnesota, Montana, Manitoba, Saskatchewan, and Alberta.
Broad Spectrum of Cultural Arts

Our concept of cultural arts encompasses not only the traditional definition of the fine arts (visual art, music, and theatre) but also the varied cultural expressions of an ethnic group (its history, society, and family life) -- in other words, the corollary materials that provide the context for artistic creation.

Since the original purposes of the land-grant university were to be close to the land and the people, the Northern Plains Cultural Center at NDSU focuses on things rural, agricultural, and regional. The collections and exhibits will emphasize the arts of rural cultures and agricultural life as well as the changing modern lifestyles and increasing urbanization of the region. The regional focus takes in not only the Dakotas, but also the Red River Valley, the Great Plains of the United States and Canada, and even (through traveling exhibits and programs) comparable regions of other nations.

An important strength of the Center is that it will include a comprehensive view of art forms, including what we sometimes call gallery art, popular art, and folk art. For example, the avant-garde works of an abstract expressionist painter, the musical scores of a renowned dance orchestra conductor, the uniquely shaped iron crosses on plains graves of the Germans from Russia community, the bison-skin winter counts of a venerable Lakota historian, and the architectural study of the barns of North Dakota will all be equally at home in the Northern Plains Cultural Center at NDSU.

Inclusive Array of Cultural Groups

The proposed Northern Plains Cultural Center at NDSU both celebrates and draws its strength from the rich diversity of past and present peoples of this country's northern plains. It will house the permanent collections of a particular ethnic culture's arts but will also feature flexible displays and visiting exhibits which represent the dynamic, ever-changing nature of the region.

Foremost among the cultural groups to be featured are our inherent regional constituencies: Northern Europeans such as Norwegians, Swedes, and Icelanders; Eastern Europeans such as Germans from Russia and Ukrainians; and Native Americans such as the Chippewa and Lakota tribes. Additional groups, including new immigrant groups, will be defined through ongoing scholarship related to exploring the region's roots. Existing collections will be expanded or supplemented through new research and collection expeditions to other countries related to the development of the northern plains. The definition of these constituencies will be the key to understanding the Cultural Center's potential for public interest, funding, and support.

Multiplicity of Publics and Approaches

The Northern Plains Cultural Center at NDSU has a natural appeal as well as a service role for a variety of audiences. One measure of its success may lie in how well it integrates its external and internal initiatives.
It will serve the general public: by fulfilling its mission of education and service to the people of North Dakota; by providing community programming that will foster lifelong learning in the area; and by drawing both national and international tourism to Fargo, to North Dakota, and to the northern plains states.

It will also serve the campus community: by allowing the NDSU Libraries to house and preserve current collections more effectively; by providing a place for more intensive research and scholarship related to the northern plains region; and by drawing others to NDSU for conferences and research in this field.

Serving many publics through a single, well-designed facility is an emerging trend nationwide. It is an integrated, cost-efficient use of resources, and its effectiveness is enhanced by a flexible use of space and multiple approaches to media, including print, still photography, video, film, audiotapes, live lectures, performances, and hands-on displays.

Finally, the power of the Cultural Center to draw in a multiplicity of people to its resources must be balanced by its power to send them back out again. It must excite the interest of visitors, whether tourists or researchers, so that they come to appreciate the region's potential and set out to explore it.

THE APPLICATIONS

The traditional functions of the land-grant university are research, instruction, and service, with special emphasis on outreach. The outreach unifies an institution's research, instruction, and service in a cooperative exchange with its external constituencies to meet identified needs. The Northern Plains Cultural Center at NDSU, therefore, mirrors these functions by maintaining collections that are the subject of scholarly research and by initiating projects that will further the pursuit of knowledge. Its collections are resources for teaching, and its operations also provide educational work experiences for students. Its facilities are made for service -- its conservation capabilities assist other regional institutions, its exhibits entice visitors to savor its heritage, and its programs enrich the quality of present-day regional life.

Expansion of Research and Scholarship

In the context of the university's research mission, the Cultural Center will provide a place to organize and integrate the work of the Institute for Regional Studies. Their objectives coincide, and their potential for advances in scholarship will enhance one another, with the advantage of proximity.

The Center will have ample space to exhibit the NDSU Libraries' currently divided and inadequately housed regional collections including the Germans from Russia Heritage Collection and the Lawrence Welk Collection, as well as the University Archives.
The Center's enhanced space, conservation equipment, and archival capacities will serve as a springboard to begin other collections, forming an increasingly comprehensive survey of the cultural expressions of the northern plains through assertive collection development.

Finally, its envisioned classroom, meeting room, and research facilities will create a place for scholars from anywhere in the world to meet and enrich their knowledge of plains cultures.

**Lifelong Learning**

The Cultural Center will demonstrate NDSU's commitment to lifelong learning for all citizens of the northern plains by providing such services as:

1. continuing education courses on plains cultures, including such topics as their history, agriculture, folklore, dress and textiles, dialects, art forms, and modern expressions;
2. public programming based on current exhibits, featuring lecturers, musical performances, video programs, dramatizations, discussion groups, and children's events; and
3. distance learning through instructional TV broadcasts, radio entertainments, traveling exhibits, and extension courses.

**Community Involvement**

The Center will promote increased participation by local and nearby community members in the life of the university:

1. by strengthening area residents' awareness of NDSU as a provider of cultural enrichment;
2. by offering the community a new source of cultural pride which highlights their family roots and ethnic heritages;
3. by providing a new gathering focus for local civic leaders through board membership, special events, and social networks; and
4. by opening doors for philanthropic giving from the community and business sectors to the Center and to NDSU.

**Tourism Potential**

The Center will fill a unique need in this region for a display and programming facility whose primary focus is on the arts and cultures important to the Dakotas and upper Midwest. Because existing galleries and museums in the region tend to present shows reflecting current art trends rather than the area's cultural heritage, there is an emerging opportunity to:

1. establish a new tourist attraction for North Dakota to draw visitors from across the region, the United States, and even the world to learn more about the Northern Plains heritage; and
2. send visitors back out to other parts of the Northern Plains to follow up their interest in a particular culture on-site and in more detail.
International Connections

As the Center thrives, it will prompt us to consider the regional as a bridge to the international. Pursuing the international origins of our own ethnic constituencies will lead us to three types of international connections: those of immigration, or cultural ancestry; those of commerce, or other interchanges past and present; and those of parallel regions, that is, other subhumid plains regions on other continents. These connections will foster:

(1) the Center’s appeal to people throughout the world, especially visitors from Northern Europe, Eastern Europe, and the former Soviet Union;

(2) the possibility of building new collections and enhancing existing collections by sending teams of scholars and researchers to Germany, Russia, Ukraine, Norway, Sweden, Iceland, and other locations that have sent significant waves of immigrants to the northern plains.

(3) the ability to attract international conferences on plains and other cultures; and

(4) the capability of offering consulting services to other similar cultural research efforts worldwide.

The Facility

While specific questions of location, size, structure, administration, and funding of the Northern Plains Cultural Center at NDSU will be left to the next stage of planning, it is clear that the key is to choose a site and design a space which will preserve its scholarly underpinnings but also be inviting to the general public. In other words, the Center’s physical setting should have a dual appeal which will bring the worlds of university scholarship and public education closer together in the pursuit of cultural knowledge.

Location

Location is at the heart of the question of purpose and publics. The new Center should neither be so deeply enclosed in the campus that it intimidates the general public, nor so obviously embedded in commercial thoroughfares that it loses its NDSU identity and convenience. It should be accessible enough to:

- campus geography, to allow easy research, teaching, and administration;
- main traffic arteries, to encourage strong tourist appeal;
- both of the above, to facilitate community programming, visiting scholars, and international conferences.

The logical location to meet these needs is on the west perimeter of the NDSU campus, along the developing 18th Street corridor between 12th and 19th avenues.
Space and Program Requirements

The new facility should be large enough and configured so as to house an array of program requirements, which may be grouped according to related functions.

**Administrative/Public Services:** The first of these groups has to do with administrative and public-relations functions. It includes administrative offices; a gift shop; a cafe and kitchen; and a conference room. Most of these elements are obvious as to need and intent, but the idea of a cafe has received particular discussion by the task force. Most museum cafeterias serve an evident utilitarian function. The cafe of the Northern Plains Cultural Center would do more. Its clientele would comprise both visitors and the campus community, along with local residents who will be attracted to it. Its menu would feature the foods of the peoples of the northern plains--food as culture. This not only would make dining an educational experience but also would provide a service not provided by any commercial enterprise in the Fargo metropolitan area.

**Educational Mission:** The second group of program requirements has to do with the educational mission to the public. It includes a reception area; a central area that task force members have come to refer to as “the great hall” (see “Design” below); galleries; and a classroom or auditorium. Individual permanent galleries would be dedicated to discrete cultural groups of the northern plains, exhibiting their arts in cultural context. Additional gallery space would be available to house temporary and traveling exhibitions. There is a need for a meeting place in the center to accommodate lectures and other educational events for large groups. Definition of its size and nature depends on the center’s relationship with other facilities that may be constructed in the vicinity.

**Collection Curation & Research:** The third group of program requirements has to do with the collections of the center. It includes offices for curatorial staff; collection storage space; a conservation lab; a reading room for researchers; and a shop for exhibit construction. The reading room would be the workplace of researchers and would house book collections along its walls. The subject of collection storage is difficult to address, but the principles are clear. The collections of the center will comprise both research materials--largely manuscript materials--and artifacts for exhibit. The line between the two is by no means fast, as many items have potential for both research and exhibit. Moreover, different physical types of materials have different environmental needs for the sake of conservation. Initially, all might be stored in a common area; eventually, as collections grow and differentiate, it will be desirable to segregate them and provide separate spaces with different environmental controls.

**Collection Storage:** Collection storage can be a thorny problem for museums, one that can be minimized at the Northern Plains Cultural Center, however, by careful definition of needs and planning. The center will be nobody’s attic. For purposes of exhibit, its collection policy will be targeted on items deliberately identified and acquired as essential representations of regional cultures. The intent will be to collect specifically for exhibit, and not acquire extensive collections of artifacts that will require storage. Collection of objects of art may depart from this policy somewhat, but should do so only for good reason and with due deliberation. Pursuit of research collections--mainly manuscript--will be more generally assertive, but manuscript collections do not pose such potential problems of simple bulk as do artifacts.
Design

Along with location, the design of the Northern Plains Cultural Center at NDSU will play a crucial role in determining its success. It must serve multiple publics with convenience and efficiency; present art and culture in the best visual setting; and represent NDSU and North Dakota in a fitting manner to the rest of the world. Task force discussions have developed certain key principles to be incorporated in design.

First, the design of the center should both evoke the open country of the plains and express the human effort to bring scale and comfort to it—the relationship between space and place, a macro-micro effect. This can be accomplished by centering the exhibition and other public areas of the facility on a great hall that invites the eye to range. Galleries, then, will reduce the scale to human proportions.

Second, the design should be one that could accommodate future growth, in both the storage and exhibit areas. As the volume of collections increases, and as additional cultural groups require representation in dedicated galleries, it must be possible to add on in a fashion that is efficient and aesthetically pleasing.

Third, design should be done with cognizance of the best that has been done with comparable facilities. The general design, as explained above, will spring from the mission of the center, from its land and peoples. Its best execution, however, may be guided by proven techniques from elsewhere.

THE VISION

The Northern Plains Cultural Center at NDSU will be an unparalleled place to study, exhibit, and perpetuate the heritage of the regional groups who populated the northern plains of the United States.

It will combine the impact of a permanent museum of the cultural arts, a dynamic center for scholarship, and an ever-changing public attraction for visitors to NDSU, to Fargo, and to the northern plains of America.

It will bring together a rich and varied array of art, artifacts, writings, and memorabilia, not only to collect and preserve precious materials but to instruct, excite, and inspire those who encounter them.

In so doing, it will have the power to portray and communicate the vital cultures of both the indigenous and immigrant groups, as well as their modern descendants, who have coalesced over the centuries to give the northern plains region its unique character and its indispensable place in history.
NORTHERN PLAINS CULTURAL CENTER
PHASED DESIGN CONCEPT

- GREAT HALL
  - Multistory
  - Reception/Information
  - Special Events
  - Multicultural Display

- LIBRARY OUTREACH
  - Institute for Regional Studies
  - University Archives
  - Auditorium/Public Programs
  - Temporary/Traveling Exhibits

- ADMINISTRATION
  - Administrative Staff
  - Public Relations
  - Clerical
  - Recordkeeping

- CULTURAL AREAS
  - Permanent Displays
  - Collection Storage
  - Preservation/Curation
  - Historical Research

- PUBLIC SERVICES
  - Ethnic Cafe
  - Giftshop
  - Restrooms
  - Building Systems