



The Rebirth of a Neighborhood

Paducah's Artist Relocation Program

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Abstract

Revitalization programs in urban areas struggle with many issues during the planning and implementation stages. The Artist Relocation Program in the Lower Town neighborhood of Paducah, KY is one such effort that has been met with relative success. It has garnered interest from urban areas nationwide interested in revitalization in their own neighborhoods and has received recognition through planning awards. Paducah's program used the arts as a focal point for the program, which is a theme used frequently in urban renewal. This paper will examine the history of Paducah's Lower Town project and compare these efforts to those of other urban areas utilizing the arts in their own revitalization efforts.

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The Themes of Neighborhood Revitalization

The early part of the 20th century in the United States was marked by the industrial revolution, the explosion of the automobile and, following the Second World War, a large increase in population. The growth in the economy during this period allowed both wages and working conditions to improve dramatically. Increased wages coupled with the automobile boom meant that those people who could were moving away from the city center where industry had concentrated and toward the periphery, where they settled in suburbs. As the wealthy residents began to leave the city center, land values began to fall, and soon historic neighborhoods were in ruins.

This trend continued for decades until a new economy emerged. The service and information economy saw the growth of high tech and financial sectors of the economy. These new jobs were filled by workers with college degrees, many of them the first in their family. Meanwhile, the trend of the urban lifestyle caught on, and demand for central city condos and houses grew. Cities across the country began to take interest in their downtowns again, and a reverse migration from suburb to the city started. This phenomenon was enhanced by the need for cities to attract new forms of economic activity to the area. This was generally done through programs that attempted to brand cities in a way that showcased their uniqueness. Often these efforts

were based around art, culture, or other “experiences” (Zukin, 1995; Pine and Gilmore, 1999).

Focused efforts

The late 1970’s and early 80’s saw the first real effort put into neighborhood renewal. Over the course of urban renewal’s history, energy has been focuses largely on historic areas. Clay (1979) writes:

Many of the localities undergoing rehabilitation are said to have some distinctive qualities. Many are designated historical districts or are contiguous to such areas. The result of [Thomas] Black’s [1975] survey indicated that 65 percent of the responding cities are experiencing renovation in historic areas.

Preservation of historic areas is an easier angle to take from a policy standpoint, as it not only revives ailing areas but also works to preserve the culture that gives cities their personalities.

This is an important point to make, especially when discussing Paducah, Kentucky’s Lower Town, which is the city’s oldest residential neighborhood. In the coming sections we will discuss how Paducah, population approx.

27,000, used the revitalization of its most historic neighborhood to rebrand itself as a center for the arts.

Before we answer the question of how the city was able to accomplish that task, we must first look at how the neighborhood began and how it grew into an area in need of public attention.

Paducah's Lower Town: Before

Paducah's Lower Town neighborhood is both the oldest and most storied in the city. Its ascension to glory began in the mid-1800s as Paducah's railroad and river industries began to take off (PCNRHS, 2008). Lower Town grew as the residential neighborhood for the workers of these industries.

During the civil war, many of these homes were lost. According to Ira Erwin, owner of the Working Artist Studio in Lower Town, "We lost a lot of the original homes in this neighborhood during the Civil War. When [Union General] Grant captured Paducah, he ordered that all the homes over two stories be burned (quoted in Pringle, 2008)."

Following the war, businessmen rich from the railroad and shipping industries rebuilt the neighborhood with large, lavish mansions. They quickly realized that the area sat in a low basin (hence the Lower Town

name), and following a series of floods, most notably the 1937 flood, these owners moved to higher elevations to avoid the continuous repair costs (Pringle, 2008).

Following the departure of the original owners, Lower Town began to decay. This process lasted for decades following World War II. Despite its condition, the neighborhood was placed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1982. However, even with the recognition as a historic district, the neighborhood continued to decay. Home ownership plummeted and by 2000 over 70% of the homes were rentals (Iams & Kaplan, et. al. 2006).

Landlords grew increasingly negligent and the overall blight of the neighborhood fostered an increase in crime rates. Resident and artist Mark Barone witnessed a drug deal from his porch one morning and decided that enough was enough; something needed to be done to save this once great area of Paducah (Hurley, 2002). What developed was a partnership between Barone and the city that would attract and use artists from around the country to restore Lower Town to its former prestige.

Implementation of the Artist Relocation Program

Following the early morning drug deal, Barone took his idea, loosely based on a program in Rising Sun, Indiana, to the Paducah Planning Commission.

Almost immediately he was on the city payroll as the head consultant for the program.

The first and most important step for any public initiative was to seek input from the city's residents. Then-planning director Tom Barnett explained the positives and negatives of the neighborhood:

“Listed among the strengths were cultural diversity, cheap, available property, proximity to downtown...key negatives discussed involved crime, particularly drug activity, lack of property maintenance, traffic... (Bradley, 2001).”

The city commissioners then approved \$40,000 for the program to be added to the budget in 2001 (Bradley, 2000). Later, money would be available from a Federal Highway Grant that was used towards infrastructure upgrades. Among these infrastructure improvements were new sidewalks, upgrading the condition of the streets, and new rain gutters. This was an important step, and will be discussed in greater detail below.

Barone urged the city to create ordinances that required landlords to bring their properties up to code. Meanwhile, the city began steps to make the area attractive to artists. First, the area was rezoned to both residential and commercial to allow for mixed use development. This action benefitted incoming artists by allowing them to establish a gallery or café as well as living space in the same building (Iams & Kaplan, et. al. 2006). An

advertising campaign not only brought in artists from around the nation, but also brought business to the artists that were establishing themselves in Lower Town.

The city made funding available to pay for up to \$2500 of professional service costs such as architects and designers (Paducah Artist Relocation Program). Most of the funding, however, came from the partnership with Paducah Bank, which provided many of the loans given to new residents in Lower Town¹. Among the features of financing from Paducah Bank were loans that covered property and renovation costs, sometimes as much as 300% of the value of the building (Pringle, 2008). According to the website for the Artist Relocation Program, these loans average at a very reasonable 7%, 30-year fixed rate.

¹ Bank President Wally Bateman was originally reluctant to partner with the program, but eventually agreed, citing the bank headquarters' location near Lower Town, and the desire to better the community of which the bank is so intricately a part (Bradley, 2002a).

Paducah's Lower Town: After

Benefits

Since 2000 the award winning² program has numerous benefits for the neighborhood as well as the economy of the city as a whole:

- Over 50 relocated artists opened 18 galleries
- \$25 million in private investment
- Total increase in government revenue from licenses and taxes was estimated at \$107,100 for the first five years
- 80 structures have been renovated and 20 constructed new
- “Quality of life gains for entire city: priceless”³

² American Planning Association – National Planning Award/Special Community Initiative.
Kentucky Chapter of the American Planning Association – Special Merit Award for Outstanding Planning.

2002 Governor's Government Award in the Arts.

2001 James C. Howland Awards for Urban Enrichment – Recognition Award.

Kentucky Arts Council Grant.

City of Paducah Beautification Award.

Kentucky Bankers Association – BKD Award for Excellence and Innovation

Kentucky Bankers Association – Pegasus Award for Community Project

2004 Kentucky League of Cities – Enterprise Cities Award

Dorothy Mullins Arts and Humanities Award – National Recreation and Parks Association

2005 Rudy Bruner Award for Urban Excellence

Source: Paducah Artist Relocation Program. www.paducaharts.com

³ Source: Paducah City Planning Office

“Studios, artist-run galleries, cafés and numerous restoration projects have made significant economic impacts in the area. In the last six years, the City of Paducah has seen a \$14 return on every \$1 it initially invested in the Artist Relocation Program (Matyas, 2007).”

A benefit more important than statistics, however, may be the increased social activity in the area. Prior to the creation of the program, Lower Town was one of the last places in Paducah you would expect to find a street festival. Today, the Lower Town Arts Festival rivals the Paducah Summer Festival and Barbecue on the River (two of the largest in the area, both with longer histories) in terms of popularity.

Many artists relocated to Paducah from larger urban areas. Relocated artist Mark Palmer moved to Lower Town from his beloved Washington, DC. Plamer says, “I like the idea of Paducah having artists coming here from around the country from so many backgrounds. A lot of us have been there and done that in the big city...I think [Paducah] will be a really unique destination...(quoted in Bradley, 2002b).”

As a result of increased public investment in infrastructure, a walk or drive through the neighborhood is a pleasurable experience. Gone are the days of

fear on the streets of Lower Town. Private investment has created new storefronts, sidewalk cafes, and new nightlife destinations that have each added to both the attractiveness and walkability of the area.

The success of the area has allowed the city to turn its attention to other neighborhoods near downtown that are in need of rehabilitation. In 2005 the city raised its tax rate by half a point to allow more funds to be available for projects like a new riverfront and the Fountain Avenue neighborhood⁴ (Richter, 2008).

Negatives

As in most cases of neighborhood renewal, gentrification plays a big role. As more investment flows into a neighborhood, land values rise. This rise in values prices out lower-income residents and can lead to the relocation of many working-class families.

Artists in this case are bringing in their own money, as well as added capital in the form of loans from Paducah Bank. This, combined with infrastructure development on the part of the city, creates drastic physical upgrades to the area. More important, however, is the attraction of the middle and upper

⁴ Fountain Avenue is another working-class neighborhood that has been the victim of decay over the last few decades. Information on the project as well as the riverfront project can be found at <http://paducahky.gov/paducah/fountain-avenue> and <http://paducahky.gov/paducah/riverfront-master-plan>

classes to specialty restaurants and art galleries. This, in turn, changes the nature of the neighborhood from low income and working class to an area associated with an upper-middle class lifestyle.

As Phillip Clay (1979) writes:

In [gentrification], population change is more important than physical change, although physical improvements are also important. The “gentry” create a neighborhood ambiance that reflects upper middle class tastes and values; their tastes and values supplant those of the lower-income population that dominated the area before revitalization.

Soon after the creation of the program, citizens who were being displaced from their homes spoke out. The way the city was acquiring property for sale to artists was unethical, they claimed, because they were condemning the houses or buying them for very small amounts, then charging higher amounts to artists for profit (Deneal, 2002). Others were forced out when the city required the condition of their homes to be upgraded.⁵

⁵ Further information was not available on this situation. However, work has continued uninterrupted in the neighborhood.

Why Artists?

To quote Tom Barnett, planning director at the time the program was started, “Artists are the kind of folks who see what can be. They see potential, and we knew that was what it was going to take when they came in to see the neighborhood in its current condition (quoted in Buffalo Rising Magazine, 2007).”

Many downtown revitalization projects include a focus on culture, and these cultural projects are usually located in decaying downtowns or riverfronts (Strom, 2002). Paducah’s use of art in its revitalization program is a trend occurring in downtowns everywhere, and is a good example of culture and gentrification together. Art is frequently used in public policies in cities to facilitate regenerations in decaying cities. In fact, gentrification and art are usually seen as “mutually dependent” (Cameron & Coaffee, 2005; Strom, 2002). These cities are seeing that cultural amenities could be more important than low taxes when looking for skilled labor to locate nearby (Strom, 2002). Strom illustrates this by pointing at Louisville, KY, where “70% of the members of Louisville’s most prestigious development organizations also served on the boards of cultural organizations.” This argument is echoed by Richard Florida (2005) in his theory based on members of what he calls the “Creative Class,” which are intellectual workers whom the author believes are the driving economic development in modern urban areas. The location of these workers is closely correlated to the

“Bohemian Index,” a measure of the concentration of artists, musicians, writers, and the like in a city. This correlation demonstrates the importance of a thriving arts scene in cities with the fastest growing economies.

Paducah isn't the only place that art has been used as a theme for neighborhood revitalization. This paper focuses on two neighborhoods with many characteristics similar to Paducah's efforts. However, each of these neighborhoods has its own unique qualities that act to show that there are many ways to go about a project of this type.

Related Project: Chicago's Wicker Park

One of the most interesting examples of the effects of artists on a neighborhood is Chicago's Wicker Park. Much like Paducah's Lower Town, Wicker Park has used the growth of an artist community to facilitate the redevelopment of the neighborhood.

In the 1980s, the Wicker Park neighborhood saw its economy declining and the physical and social environments decaying. A project to revive the area's music scene began in 1993 and soon rose to national prominence. Similar to the way Paducah's planners used art magazines and other media related closely with their audience, Wicker Park gained national attention though

advertising media such as MTV, which based its reality show “The Real World”⁶ in the neighborhood in 2001 (Lloyd, 2002).

Originally an industrial neighborhood, artists and musicians flocked to the area seeking low rents in the historic buildings, “most of them crumbling and sheathed in soot,” according to a New York Times article by Margy Rochlin (1994). Residents of the area indicate the rebirth of the neighborhood is not the last. Brad Wood, quoted in the same article, said, “I think it’s very similar to Greenwich Village [in New York City], which has gone through several cycles of being a wonderful place to hang out. To me, it’s just a blip in the life of an urban neighborhood.”

Wicker Park is another example of a decaying neighborhood plagued by crumbling buildings and drug activity (Lloyd, 2002) that was saved by artists. In this case, however, artists were attracted to a blighted area because of low rents, and with very little encouragement from the local government of Chicago.

Related Project: Fountain Square in Indianapolis, Indiana

The Fountain Square neighborhood in Indianapolis, Indiana has had a very similar history to that of Paducah. The neighborhood grew as a commercial

⁶ The Real World is a reality television show in which participants live and work in a different city each season. There is generally a music theme to the work they are required to do during the course of the show.

center in the mid- to late-1800s. Much like the entire city of Paducah, the Fountain Square area owes its early growth to the expansion of the railroads in the area. The first half of the 20th century saw the addition of a number of commercial developments, most notable theaters, which had greater numbers in Fountain Square than anywhere else in Indianapolis (Discover Fountain Square). The second half of the 1900s wasn't so kind to the area, which experienced significant decay as other parts of the city began to develop. The construction of I-65 in the 1970s carved up the area, destroying thousands of homes and businesses in the process (Iams & Kaplan, et. al. 2006).

Since the mid 1980s, the Southeast Side Neighborhood Development, or SEND, began work in the area. Unlike in Paducah, where the inhabitants of the buildings did the renovation work, Fountain Avenue was rebuilt almost entirely through the work of this organization and donations from private investors. Most of the development was focused on larger projects, such as one that provided 32 studios to local artists. Others included new retail space, and a renovated Fountain Square Theater Building (Iams & Kaplan, et. al. 2006). The development continues today and is focused using an arts scene to bring the neighborhood back to its status as a commercial center for the city of Indianapolis.

This is an interesting case to compare to Paducah in that its approach is radically different, especially in terms of scale, but it essentially achieves the same goal. Lower Town's success came from the individuals working on

relatively small projects in concert. There were large developments nearby, such as the Luther F. Carson Four Rivers Center⁷, but the majority of development came on a small scale.

In Fountain Square, however, the nature of the neighborhood was slightly different. The area was historically commercial in nature, and the developments that occurred were on a larger scale, intended to attract retail and commercial interests to the area. The development was done through a central group with a vision for the neighborhood.

Both Lower Town and Fountain Square, however, recognized that artists and a community that supports them can be beneficial in reviving an area's physical environment while also promoting economic growth.

Conclusion

Paducah's Lower Town neighborhood represents a model for success when attempting a neighborhood renewal process with the use of an arts community. Paducah, despite its size, has experienced some of the same economic growth and decline cycles as cities many times larger. Urban areas across the country have experienced decay in their inner city neighborhoods and could learn a lot from the policies of the Artist Relocation Program.

⁷ The Four Rivers Center is a 97,750 sq. ft. performing arts venue which seats 1806 guests in its main hall (carsoncenter.org).

The program was a success because it did the fundamentals of community projects well. It started as a grassroots effort that gained the support of the city. From an early stage, citizens of the affected area were brought in to discuss the plans for rehabilitation. A partnership with the local Paducah Bank was essential in making the area attractive to artists who may not have had enough capital to do the renovations themselves. Most importantly, the city's vision of a thriving arts community and a neighborhood that would give every resident of the city a sense of pride was never questioned.

Lower Town was not a perfect plan. As with all neighborhood renewal efforts, the project was not immune from the side effects of gentrification. In achieving the goal of a better neighborhood, some residents were priced out of their homes. Ideally this would not happen, but the overall benefits to the city as a whole must be taken into account and weighed against the consequences of rising land values.

All too often historic areas of cities that fall into a state of decay are condemned, razed, and rebuilt as modern shopping areas or condominiums. The Lower Town example shows that cities can have their cake and eat it too, providing urban living while maintaining the history that defines the character of the city. As the trend of migration back to the city center continues, urban areas across the country should be learning from the successes of the small town of Paducah, Kentucky and its thriving Lower Town arts community.

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