Chapter 2

How the Arts Drive Downtown Revitalization

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With their substantial budgets, political support, public relations campaigns, and polyurethane architectural models, large-scale arts developments have the clout needed to command the attention of both taxpayers and the media, as demonstrated by the nationwide coverage of the opening last year of the New Jersey Performing Arts Center in Newark and the opening this year of Benaroya Hall in downtown Seattle. It is only natural for cities to want to showcase their regional cultural gems, not to mention touring national and international artists and performers, in a brand-new facility. In many instances, arts projects are announced as integral components of urban revitalization efforts targeted at underused and crime-associated downtowns.

Small towns and cities with modest populations also are facing their own downtown revitalization dilemmas. Until recently, those areas were in dire straits when considering strategies to stabilize, let alone revitalize, their downtown business districts. Just as places such as Telluride, Colorado; Beaufort, South Carolina; La Conner, Washington; and Moab, Utah, were ready to toss in the towel after giving up on attracting a new Toyota or IBM manufacturing facility, the arts, outdoor recreation, and cultural tourism began to offer small towns and cities like these a life preserver in the form of newly defined economic opportunities.

Several forces came into play simultaneously to rebuild local tax bases, restore property values, and provide developers and entrepreneurs with investment incentives. Among them were improvements in telecommunications and transportation, for example, which allowed professionals to reside part- or full-time in small towns yet remain connected to their home offices and clients and permitted entrepreneurs to expand their sales beyond their immediate area. New sport trends coupled with better highways, more accessible airports, and improvements to the infrastructure of existing sport and outdoor recreation facilities gave sport patrons incentives to travel longer distances from their metropolitan area homes for day trips, weekend stays, and vacations. And finally, changes related to the arts had a dramatic effect on art communities and economic opportunities in small towns and cities.

The first of these changes resulted from artists and arts professionals leaving metropolitan areas in search of small-town safety,

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affordability, and sense of community. The second change occurred when a new generation of Americans and Canadians began purchasing art while traveling outside the reach of urban art galleries. The combined impact of these changes resulted in an influx of arts supporters and consumers with substantial financial resources to small towns and cities where they had not been visible before. In the 1950s, the same types of arts consumers had made possible the sustained profitability — as seen in the rise of art galleries and the increase in real estate values, restaurants, and interior furnishing stores — of what once were referred to as art colonies in places such as Carmel, California; Provincetown, Massachusetts; Woodstock, Vermont; and Key West, Florida.

But it is misleading to use the designation "art colonies" to describe multifaceted communities such as Taos, New Mexico; Ojai, California; Fredericksburg, Texas; and Bennington, Vermont, where today the arts are contributing to economic development, cultural tourism, downtown revitalization, and the restoration of civic pride and purpose.

The market in places like Santa Fe, New Mexico; Aspen, Colorado; Park City, Utah; Hilton Head, South Carolina; and Asheville, North Carolina, supports dozens of art galleries selling everything from international contemporary art to wildlife art to photography to monumental bronze and aluminum sculptures. In Santa Fe, the number of art galleries alone exceeds 200. As for the clients patronizing these galleries, many are vacationing or second- or third-home-owning urbanites who have cut their allegiance to metropolitan art galleries and started making their art-buying decisions on their own.

In the same way that visual artists and art gallery owners have found it possible in recent years to make a living in places that had never been widely known for supporting the arts, performing artists, arts center administrators, musicians, writers, and theater directors have found small towns and cities welcoming, if not always lucrative, places to pursue their careers. Chamber orchestras, community theater companies, and literary conferences have sprung up around the country. In many small towns and cities (some with universities), full orchestras, performing arts centers seating audiences in excess of 1,000, and arts organizations capable of booking the same acts that do well in metropolitan areas are flourishing.

Several small towns known for outdoor recreation and cultural tourism have branched out by building arts facilities. In the past few years alone, Grand Marais, Minnesota; Vail, Colorado; Ruidoso, New Mexico; Missoula, Montana; and Park City, Utah, have opened performing arts centers. The economic impact of these centers has resulted in everything from more meals being served in local restaurants to more gallons of gas being pumped at local filling stations to the proliferation of art-filled coffee bars, live music nightclubs, artists' cooperative galleries, interior design showrooms, and high-end crafts galleries. As the art scene improves, so does the quality of life in the surrounding community.

Many small towns and cities have capitalized on the increased demand for arts-oriented facilities and services by restoring historic buildings for reuse as arts centers. Charlottesville, Virginia, and Bozeman, Montana, have turned their old high schools into centers that incubate creative businesses ranging from artists' studios to Web design and poetry publishing ventures. Salida, Colorado, refitted its power-generating plant as an arts center, while Durango, Colorado, turned a car dealership building into a community arts center. Burlington, Vermont, did the same with a historic firehouse, and Portland, Maine, saved a historic department store by converting it into a downtown arts school. Berkeley Springs, West Virginia, turned an old apple warehouse into its community arts center, while Santa Fe converted a beer warehouse into a center for international contemporary art.

Because financing options are more limited in small towns and cities than in urban areas, their arts-related development efforts usually shy away from planning large projects in favor of taking incremental steps toward creating the type of climate best suited for entrepreneurial investment: old schools are renovated; "percent-for-the-arts" programs are instituted; planters and traffic-calming devices are installed along city streets; tax incentives are developed to encourage establishments of art galleries, artists' studios, and cafés in certain downtown neighborhoods; and building codes are changed to permit live/work space for artists in unoccupied second- and third-story levels of downtown buildings.

Though these strategies may not seem to put a community on the fast track to economic revitalization, the forces involved — from historic preservation groups to arts organizations and, most important, shallow municipal coffers — dictate the need for incremental development rather than large-scale projects. On the positive side, this kind of small-scale, step-by-step development elicits a greater degree of community involvement and thus tends to reflect the demography and culture of each town — thereby boosting its long-range prospects for success. There is, however, the possibility of overestimating the economic impact of arts-related projects. Strategies that seem to work best are those developed from the street-level activities of artists, arts entrepreneurs, and other professionals in the creative field.

"Arts projects with the best chances for success in revitalizing underused downtowns are ones that target the local community as well as visitors," notes New York City journalist Roberta Brandes Gratz, author of *Cities Back from the Edge: New Life for Downtown*. "Projects that target only the needs of tourists or suburbanites will find it difficult to affect the local economy or even businesses down the block and around the corner," she adds.

According to Gratz, arts projects and revitalization efforts do best when "they reflect the personality and character of the local area and reject a formulaic approach. Underused buildings and historic theaters that are renovated for an arts-related purpose become creatively woven into an area and have an excellent opportunity to spark adjoining entrepreneurial investment in the form of restaurants, art galleries, and art schools," she continues. "When a community targets a certain neighborhood as an arts district, what usually results is a revaluation of already existing infrastructure, but even a new project that connects reasonably well with the downtown streetscape can have a good chance for success provided it relates to its surroundings."

Cases in Point

Communities successfully using the arts for economic development seem to write their own scripts, developing strategies that consider the nuances of their downtowns as well as gauging the degree to which local arts communities can absorb and adapt to arts-related infrastructure improvements and expanded public art programs. Communities serious about using the arts as a vehicle for economic development should bring artists, arts administrators, and arts business owners into the earliest stages of their planning efforts to craft approaches that aim to achieve community concensus.

Burlington, Vermont. When art galleries in this Lake Champlain city began scattering themselves across a wide swath of Burlington's historic downtown, Burlington City Arts, a public sector agency, developed a strategy with two goals: proving to the downtown business community and the city's chamber of commerce that arts-related entrepreneurship was playing a significant role in Burlington's revitalization; and linking the activities of downtown's art galleries and arts-exhibiting cafés in a way that would generate significant downtown foot traffic and economic activity. The result is Burlington's Art Walk, an event coordinated and promoted by Burlington City Arts in which galleries and cafés stage opening receptions for art exhibitions on the same evening each month. During cold weather, Art Walk becomes the Trolley Tour, with Burlington City Arts funding the use of a motorized and heated trolley car to shuttle art lovers to Art Walk sites.

Hot Springs, Arkansas. When two art gallery zones began developing six blocks from each other along Bathhouse Row—Central Avenue's underused south end, which is part of Hot Springs National Park—property owners along south Central Avenue created a business improvement district (BID) to develop a special tax assessment to fund street-level improvements such as new sidewalks, lighting fixtures, planters, banners, and a water-drainage system. The BID's improvements, coupled with efforts to restore historic building facades with assistance from Hot Springs' Main Street USA program, have been so successful that today the length of Central Avenue's south end is filled with restaurants, more than a dozen art galleries, and several interior furnishings stores. Motivated in part by Central Avenue's success, Hot Springs recently has restored its historic train depot by turning it into a transportation center to accommodate city tour buses and a tourist parking center; it also has completed a more than 300,000-square-foot expansion of its convention center.

Loveland, Colorado. The state's first percent-for-the-arts program was established here in response to Loveland's unanticipated emergence as the country's preeminent location for the creation of realist bronze sculpture. Today, Loveland is home to several hundred sculptors as well as several bronze foundries, a dozen art galleries, and North America's largest annual sculpture exhibition. Using percent-for-the-arts money derived from municipally funded capital improvement projects to purchase bronze sculptures—and combining those with works donated to the city by artists, benefactors, and the organizers of the annual sculpture exhibition—Loveland has placed dozens of monumental-scale public art works throughout its downtown and along main thoroughfares. A steady stream of tourists from across the Rocky Mountain region regularly visits Loveland for its self-guided public sculpture tour. The city has seen the establishment of an art school, as well as more art galleries and restaurants, and Loveland's downtown storefronts are filled.

Lawrence, Kansas. Each year, historic Massachusetts Street, the pedestrian core of this university town, becomes the setting for a juried, rotating outdoor sculpture exhibition coordinated by the Lawrence Arts Commission, the city's arts agency. Using Massachusetts Street's sidewalks as an art gallery has had some interesting results, according to Ann Evans, director of the Lawrence Arts Center. "It's become a focal point for our visitors and a symbol of downtown's support for the arts," observes Evans.

Easton, Maryland. A top-to-bottom renovation of the historic Avalon Theatre, a 1921 art-deco masterpiece in downtown Easton, Maryland, has had a broad impact on this Eastern Shore community's economy. According to Ellen General, president of the Avalon Foundation, which supervised the renovation and manages the facility, the 1989 restoration of the theater's interior was followed by several years' worth of upgrading to the Avalon's sound, lighting, projection, broadcast, and film production facilities. Now home to everything from classical music concerts to live radio shows and touring national dance company performances, the Avalon "has brought 40,000 people yearly into a town of 11,000 residents," says General. "On the nights we have shows, the restaurants are filled, the gas stations pump more gas, and stores are busy — in fact, more stores have opened downtown as a result. We're even putting in a new visitor center," she adds.

Nelson, British Columbia. Upon moving to this lakeside corner of southern British Columbia in 1994, Palo Alto, California, innkeepers Brooke and Sandy Leatherman determined that this hotbed of crafts and visual artists — and home to one of Canada's largest art schools — needed a summer arts festival to inject some much-needed business traffic as well as a little zaniness into downtown Nelson. Capitalizing on the success of Edmonton, Alberta's International Street Performers Festival, the Leathermans launched StreetFest, a smaller presentation showcasing street buskers and singers on the weekend following the Edmonton event. In its first year, 1997, StreetFest drew 37,000 visitors to downtown Nelson over a three-day run, prompting Nelson's business leaders to come up with a $12,500 contribution to ensure the event's continued success. The results were more than tangible when 1998's StreetFest drew 53,000 visitors to downtown Nelson for late July festivities.

As these communities and others have shown, the economic benefits of arts-driven development projects now are within reach of places with relatively small populations. This is partly a response to shifting attitudes about the quality of arts programs and artists in these communities, but it also is an indication that the potential of the arts for realizing economic development and downtown revitalization goals has yet to be fully tapped.