

FRAMING RURAL ARTS, ASSETS, AND OPPORTUNITIES

Cultural Economic Development in the Southeast

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Arts and culture have become widely accepted tools of economic development and revitalization. Coming into public consciousness perhaps most recognizably in the work of Richard Florida and his theories of building—or rebuilding—a city around the creative class, arts and culture are the protean intangibles in many urban planning projects. They are the nebulous factors sought after to attract well-educated, mobile citizens.

Repurposing or development of previously unused physical space or dilapidated real estate for use as a creative—and revenue-generating—facility is one form of arts and culture-based economic development. Unsurprisingly, big cities have led the charge in these endeavors, using their relatively deep pockets and large planning departments to implement creative revitalization projects in long-disadvantaged neighborhoods. The goals of these projects will be familiar to economic development practitioners and revitalization gurus: increased tourism, new square footage of mixed-use development, and new independent businesses.

But while large metropolises may be at the forefront of these projects, they are not exclusively their domain. Smaller cities have also shown interest in arts and culture-based

economic development projects. Success, though, can be quixotic for these cities. Their unique challenges include: How to spur innovative arts and culture-based economic development with limited budgets and staff? And how to overcome practitioners and citizens who may chafe at unproven, unorthodox ideas?

Three cities in America's southeast are providing some answers. Shelby and Wilson, both in North Carolina, and Newberry, South Carolina, are in various stages of arts and culture-based economic development initiatives. All former textile or tobacco towns, each city prospered until around the mid-twentieth century, subsequently falling on harder times which have included population decline and rising unemployment. In the 1990s, Newberry turned to its historic, long-dormant downtown opera house to attract tourists. Shelby created two downtown attractions, the Don Gibson Theatre, opened in 2009, and the Earl Scruggs Center, opened January 2014, commemorating seminal musicians with roots in the town. Wilson is in the process of opening the Vollis Simpson Whirligig Park on a two-acre downtown lot. The park will display the dynamic, singular sculptures created by Simpson, the iconoclastic artist who lived in Wilson County nearly his entire life before passing away in 2013, and whose work was later named North Carolina's official state folk art.

The results thus far are encouraging. The Newberry Opera House attracts around 100,000 theatregoers annually. Shelby has experienced growth in downtown business starts since its projects began, and Wilson has recently seen the first mixed-use development in its downtown's history. Harder to quantify, officials in each town report an ineffable momentum not felt in their respective downtowns for decades.

How were the unique challenges of small town arts and culture-based economic development overcome? Four primary lessons can be drawn from Shelby, Wilson, and Newberry's shared experiences.

Context-Specific for Capitalizing on the Local Sense of Place

First, each project was authentic to the town and resonated with residents. Rather than an imported, impersonal project, in each case there were clear, deep connections to town history and culture. Simpson in Wilson, Scruggs and Gibson in Shelby, the Opera House in Newberry—all are cherished aspects of local heritage prized by those who have spent their lives in these places. Moreover, these were icons which locals by-and-large were proud to have serve as representations of their towns to the rest of the world. Wilson, Shelby, and Newberry show that the best small town arts and culture-based economic development or revitalization projects are authentic community representations which resonate first and foremost with area residents. This means they take something from the community as their foundation—be it a person, a collection, a legacy, or a building—and use it as a bridge to relate to visitors.

This observation is paramount for two reasons. First, without local support, small town arts and culture-based economic development projects are difficult to successfully implement. This is compounded by the fact that small towns have limited budgets and resources and are in a particularly vulnerable position with regards to recovering from expensive, misguided projects. Several examples exist throughout the southeast of arts-based economic



Vollis Simpson Whirligig Park in Wilson, North Carolina.
Photo credit: Adam Levin.

development projects whose lack of local support drove their dysfunction. Among the most prominent is the Carolina Crossroads project. The Crossroads complex in Roanoke Rapids, North Carolina, is a planned entertainment destination driven mostly by Randy Parton, brother of Dolly and a Tennessee native. Without solid planning and management and local support, the project has been mired in serious legal and financial troubles for the better part of the past decade.

The other reason this takeaway is significant is that it has been shown that arts and culture tourists assess a project by its authenticity, and that authenticity is dear to them. Tapping into an existing, well-established asset in a community gives locals cause to care about the project and a source of pride, both of which are evident to outsiders. Building a random monument to something or someone with only a tangential connection to a given community will be a less effective technique than repurposing an existing historic structure or honoring someone with broad outside appeal and deep community roots. Tourists will seek the real.

Asset-Based Economic Development

Building on this, the second finding is that a successful arts and culture-based economic development project requires an accurate understanding of what a community's authentic assets are. Appropriating the iconography of a famous person or culture from elsewhere is not a strong strategy—a community has to know what makes it unique. Recognizing that, and analyzing if that unique factor is enough to bring in outsiders, is critical to developing a successful arts and culture-based economic development project in a small town. If a unique asset cannot be identified, it could be wise to pursue a different revitalization strategy. If such

an asset can be identified, success is not guaranteed—the asset still has to be properly presented and cared for—but by building around it, there may be a spark for economic development.

Small towns considering an arts-based approach to economic development are wise to perform significant research to understand how valuable their asset is and how appropriate it might be to build a project around it. In Shelby, for instance, the team behind both the Don Gibson Theatre and Earl Scruggs Center (composed, notably of both town officials and private citizens) embarked on two separate trips throughout the south to investigate projects similar to what they had in mind, including the Carter Family Fold in Hiltons, Virginia. Learning about the history and operations of these projects and understanding where other towns had encountered difficulty and found success helped Shelby develop a vision for its own projects. Shelby also brought in an independent consultant to perform a market study in an effort to quantify how many visitors could be anticipated.

Community and Professional Collaboration

A third observation is that each project was initially generated by community members. This helped the projects gain traction and aided in countering skepticism. Rather than a prescribed, top-down approach to revitalization, the bottom-up approach enabled more organic projects that increased community buy-in and developed emotional investment in community members. While this may not be necessary in every small town, small towns do have lower populations where community members know each other. This familiarity may endear a citizen-bred project to the community more than one originating with a planning professional with fewer community ties.

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Related to this observation, each project was captained by a well-known local who, in each case, provided an indefatigable presence throughout the process. By having a well-placed local at the center of each project, these efforts were able to tap into funding and support channels which otherwise might not have been available to professionals. These community leaders had more social capital, both inside and outside the community, than local officials.

That social capital facilitated another common theme to the projects: connecting with large outside partners. Each project secured foundation funding and the involvement of recognized, reputable partners such as the Smithsonian Institution and federal Economic Development Administration. Connecting with deep-pocketed and knowledgeable outside partners is essential to success for small towns with limited resources, particularly so in an unproven arts and culture-based project.

Long-Term Focus

Finally, a word on the projects' respective timelines. Those involved in Shelby commenced their research in 2006 after forming a task force the previous year and conducted five community meetings throughout 2007. (The Don Gibson Theatre opened in 2009 and the Earl Scruggs Center in 2014.) Community members in Wilson contemplated displaying Simpson's sculptures downtown for at least a decade before a proposal came about in 2009, and have been working on refurbishing the pieces since 2012. (The park is still in the process of fully opening.) And in Newberry, between finding proper staff and completing the building's physical renovation, the opera house's redevelopment took around five years. These lengthy stretches should remind planners that major projects, whether they revolve around the arts or anything else, require time and commitment.

Parting Thoughts: Rounding out the Toolbox

For small cities and towns, economic development can seem a quixotic challenge. The standard practices—tax incentives for businesses and workforce development—can be effective, but often fall short, requiring both complementary tools to reach their full, sustainable potential and significant amounts of outside expertise and cooperation. Moreover, while these methods can, in the best cases, inject life into declining places, they are focused more on the clinical, sterile side of economic development. Drawing talent and stimulating business growth is laudable, but if a town's lack of vibrancy and pride are clear to new residents, how strongly will employers and individuals be drawn to the place going forward? The methods presented in this article—an asset-based approach, in this case revolving around arts and culture—could serve as the endogenous complement to traditional economic development practices that give a small city or town the full suite of tools it needs. By focusing on existing assets with an eye towards turning them into future assets, a place can start to develop a well-rounded, sustainable economic development strategy. 

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