Building a Winner: Arts and Culture-Based Economic Development and Downtown Revitalization in Small Towns

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A Masters Project submitted to the faculty of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of City and Regional Planning in the Department of City and Regional Planning

Chapel Hill

2015

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INTRODUCTION

Revitalization and economic development projects based upon arts and culture or incorporating elements of them have gained favor with economic and community development practitioners in urban neighborhoods and downtowns throughout North America. From Chicago’s South Side to Toronto, these projects have helped usher in renewed stability and vitality, drawing tourism dollars, private investment, new businesses and an increased sense of community pride to their areas.1 Arts and culture revitalization projects can catalyze economic development by leveraging underutilized physical and cultural assets often already existing in a neighborhood. Arts and culture revitalization efforts have, in certain cases, shown themselves to be effective and efficient tools for economic stabilization and growth by, among other things, repurposing vacant and underused real estate and infrastructure.

This paper will show that arts and culture-based projects can be sources of endogenous growth and succeed as agents of revitalization and economic development in small towns as well as large cities. These projects, when done well, can trigger increased private investment, new business growth, tourist spending and even industrial recruitment for these places. But when done wrong, arts and culture-based economic development projects can divert valuable resources and use up precious social capital, making the goals of revitalization and economic development ever more distant. The question, then, is how does a small town—with more limited resources, smaller populations and fewer drivers of tourism than a Toronto or a Chicago—do arts and culture-based economic development projects right? How can a small town build a winning strategy?

The risk of not knowing the answer can be the difference between a successful revitalization program for a small town and one that eats up resources, makes local citizens and decision-makers wary of future revitalization efforts and leaves its intended target no better off or in worse shape than before. To be sure, not all small towns are in a position to implement a successful arts and culture-based strategy. Others would be better served using alternative methods to revitalize their downtowns or generate economic development. This makes it all the more imperative for those considering such strategies to understand what makes them work prior to allocating resources to them.

The dangers of not knowing how to pick a winner become more pronounced when viewed against the economic shifts prevalent in small towns during the past quarter century. With many moving away from a model of one or two major employers—be they a paper mill or furniture factory or something else of that ilk—supplying most area jobs, these places may see the data on cultural tourist spending habits, think that their town has enough culture to draw in outsiders—or, worse yet, think they can manufacture some ersatz culture—and believe an arts and culture-based strategy is their salvation. This is decidedly not a recipe for success and sustainability, and could be an economic development blunder on the scale of relying on one major employer as a town’s lifeblood. Recognizing when to avoid such scenarios is as important as knowing when arts and culture could lead to vibrancy and prosperity.

Should a small town consider using an arts and culture-based strategy for neighborhood or downtown revitalization and economic development? What will a place need to succeed with such a strategy? How precisely should a town use arts and culture for revitalization and economic development? These are questions every small town needs to ask. This paper will
address each question in an attempt to better prepare small towns to navigate potentially uncharted policy and planning waters.

In presenting a series of three case studies on small towns that have turned to arts and culture to provide for downtown revitalization and economic development, certain themes and lessons emerge. Accurately identifying assets and correctly gauging their appeal; the necessity of having an arts and culture-based strategy bubble up from within the community; being willing to take on naysayers and developing the right arsenal of discourse to counter opponents (that is, language which can placate and convince); getting the right people to lead; and building social capital—these ideas, among others, will be fleshed out to provide the roadmap for success for future projects of the type to be examined here.

The impacts of arts and culture-based economic development and revitalization projects are palpable. Recent studies show that tourists coming from outside a county in which an arts or cultural event or destination is located spend over twice as much as their local counterparts.² This heritage tourism—defined by the National Trust for Historic Preservation as using historic structures and landscapes to bring in outsiders³ but repurposed here to mean tourism based on a neighborhood or community’s arts and cultural history, not solely physical assets—is often cited as a major benefit to using arts and culture for revitalization and economic development.

Organizations such as Artscape, Artspace and ArtPlace—the last a ten-year effort to incorporate arts and culture into planning and community development efforts sponsored by deep-pocketed partners like the Ford Foundation, Bloomberg Philanthropies and the Knight Foundation—have channeled millions of dollars into cities and neighborhoods undertaking various forms of arts and culture projects. Influential thinkers such as Richard Florida and Ann

³ http://www.preservationnation.org/information-center/economics-of-revitalization/heritage-tourism/#.VM-89C4qhcU.
Markusen have commented on the benefits of cities embracing creative placemaking and creative economies.\(^4\)

This convergence of factors has helped engender a recognition of the ability for arts and culture projects to be an important part—even the first part—of a larger process of revitalization and economic development for neighborhoods, downtowns and even cities. Having largely come to prominence in mid-size and larger cities (those with populations above 50,000) with the resources and assets to afford exploring these strategies, arts and culture economic development and revitalization projects have also come into favor in small towns.

Cities and towns spanning the population spectrum are turning to arts and culture in attempts to create sustainable revitalization and economic development projects. Driven in part by the decline in traditional job-producing industries such as manufacturing and combined with the ascendant recognition of creative placemaking, small towns are looking inward to find resources that can be the springboard in creating revitalization and economic development projects. As one North Carolina state official related, “awareness of the importance of arts-driven economic development for towns of all sizes—that is better known today than it was even five years ago, and certainly than it was twenty years ago.”\(^5\)

Furthermore, arts and culture-based revitalization and economic development projects—particularly those in the broad realm of creative placemaking, where the physical and social character of a place are strategically shaped around arts and cultural activities\(^6\)—can be especially appealing for small cities and rural places because such locales often have infrastructure available of the type well-suited for these projects. For example, main streets in small towns throughout the country have theaters which have fallen into disuse, disrepair or just

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\(^4\) Florida 2002 and Markusen and Gadwa 2011.
\(^6\) Markusen and Gadwa 2011.
plain abandonment as jobs and people relocated either to suburbs or larger metropolitan centers. Perhaps the facility is not a theater but another centrally located building that has suffered the same fate. Similarly, it is not uncommon to find vacant parcels surrounded by vacant structures in downtowns of small towns. These facilities—whether they once housed theaters, courthouses, tobacco trading posts or other remnants of eras past—are in many cases proud relics of better days, and often their distinctive architecture or history breeds the notion that they could once again provide economic and social benefits to their community.

Compared with a large metropolis, however, small towns with arts and cultural assets are under different pressures to make those assets work for revitalization and economic development. Whereas a neighborhood in a large city may have access to a diversity of resources and partners to assist in implementing any project due to its location and population—that is, it may stand a reasonable chance of “picking a winner”\(^7\)—a small town will have a harder time identifying and implementing a successful arts and culture-based revitalization or economic development project.

\(^7\) Martin, W. (14, January 2015). Personal interview.
METHODOLOGY

This paper will present three case studies to explore the process of implementing an arts and culture-based downtown revitalization and economic development projects in a small city. The definition of small city employed is analogous to the United States Census Bureau’s 2010 definition of an urban cluster: a place with between 2,500 and 50,000 residents. An urban cluster is the smaller of two urban designations the Census Bureau uses. Each of the case study towns’ population placed it in the urban cluster category as of the 2010 US Census. Urban cluster was selected as the appropriate geography for analysis because it represented a size where cities in the category would frequently have a recognizable downtown area but would still be small enough to have limited economic development and revitalization resources compared to their larger counterparts. Two of the three case studies tell the story of towns on the smaller end of the urban cluster scale, while the third focuses on one at the upper limit of the category.

The first case study looks at Shelby, North Carolina (population 20,323 in 2010). It examines Destination Cleveland County, a citizen-led group which became the driving force behind the Don Gibson Theatre and the Earl Scruggs Center. Both facilities are in Uptown Shelby, the city’s historic center, where decades of textile job losses and disinvestment took a severe toll. The projects, both of which have opened since 2009, have already changed the character of Uptown and led to the area’s resurgence.

The second case study is of the Vollis Simpson Whirligig Park in Wilson, North Carolina (population 49,155 in 2010). The Whirligig Park, which will officially open in summer 2015, has been in the works for over five years and has resulted in new development and private investment flowing into downtown Wilson. The site has been partially furnished with

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8 https://www.census.gov/geo/reference/ua/uafaq.html.
9 US Census Bureau, Table G001: Geographic Identifiers.
whirligigs—massive land-based structures somewhat reminiscent of Alexander Calder’s mobiles—since 2011 and has been accessible to the public during that time.

Finally, the paper examines the Newberry Opera House in Newberry, South Carolina (population 10,281 in 2010). The Opera House—open since 1999—provided the inspiration for some of Destination Cleveland County’s work and has been recognized as one of the preeminent operations of its kind, drawing around 100,000 theatergoers annually.

Case Study Selection

More explanation of how the case studies were selected is warranted. The foremost goal was to find places where traditional economic development resources might be limited and where arts-based projects could have real, discernable impacts. Internet research and conversations with members of the Development Finance Initiative at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and with economic development practitioners at private firms with experience in the arts-economic development space (including Mt. Auburn Associates and Regional Technology Strategies) led me to Shelby and Wilson. After hearing that the projects in Shelby were inspired in part by the Newberry Opera House I looked into that project as well.

The three projects were appealing as subjects for a number of reasons. First, each town has a clearly demarcated, historic downtown. Each downtown also went through a steady period of decline following the exit or demise of traditional regional industries, including textiles in Shelby and tobacco in Wilson. Each project also involved a type of physical entity that small towns often have—an abandoned theater, an unused courthouse or simply a vacant parcel of land in a prominent location—and which small towns may be interested in repurposing for revitalization or economic development purposes.

In each case the project under examination in this paper was the sole—or at least major—economic development or revitalization initiative happening in the respective downtowns. All three projects were intended to have a catalytic impact—that is, they were implemented with the idea of creating further growth. Each project has seen its fair share of media attention and publicity—the projects have been variously mentioned in the *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, *Southern Living* and *Our State*, among other publications. The towns’ proximity to other, larger cities also made them attractive for teasing out common themes: Shelby is about fifty miles west of Charlotte and eighty miles east of Asheville; Wilson is about forty five miles east of Raleigh; and Newberry is approximately forty miles west of Columbia, South Carolina and sixty five miles southeast of Greenville, South Carolina.¹³

There were also crucial differences which made comparison appealing. First is that the towns are on different points of the population spectrum. While Newberry and Shelby are both on the lower end, Shelby is still about twice the size of Newberry. Wilson, meanwhile, is on the verge of being classified as an urbanized area. Each project also had differing levels of citizen involvement, itself a crucial factor to the projects’ development: the Newberry Opera House was almost entirely driven by citizens; the Vollis Simpson Whirligig Park and Don Gibson Theatre and Earl Scruggs Center were more mixed between citizen and official involvement in their approaches.

The case study subjects were also selected because they are three variations of what might be thought of as prototypical small town revitalization projects. The projects revolve around developing or redeveloping theaters, town halls, courthouses and empty downtown parcels. These property types are not uncommon to small, former textile, manufacturing or company towns throughout the country. Many small towns have historic downtown structures,

¹³ Distances calculated using googlemaps.com.
particularly theaters or other performance spaces, which have been abandoned or are on the verge of vacancy. (Specifically, the transition to a digital movie projection system has led to an existential crisis among small town movie theaters.\textsuperscript{14}) The same is true of other property types in small town downtowns. These properties are often among the first targets for reuse or redevelopment in a revitalization project. As the three case studies provide examples of small towns which have done or are in the process of doing such projects, their experiences can be roadmaps for other small towns.

A potential criticism of selecting cases which could all be considered successes is that no failures are examined, and thus no contrasting lessons can be gleaned. While there is some validity to this claim, several arguments refute it. First, all interviewees related that their practices employed in the three case studies were reflective of best practices they had observed in other models. Second, despite the differences in each of the three towns, a set of unifying themes clearly stood out among the cases. Finally, and perhaps most vitally, is that an endeavor such as an arts and culture-based economic development project can be derailed in myriad ways; documenting all of them would be nigh impossible. The lessons learned from the three cases within, then, should be seen as representing necessary—although perhaps not sufficient—criteria for success. Every case will have varying particulars. The broad measures for success, though, have been brought to light here.

\textit{Research Process}

The case studies are primarily the result of firsthand research conducted via interviews with subjects who have worked directly on the projects’ implementation or continue to be involved with day to day operations. The group can be divided into two smaller groups: members

of the first group of interviewees were selected because they were well-positioned to identify the metrics and indicators that the projects were designed to impact. Members of the second group were chosen because they could give necessary insight into the processes of how the projects came to hit (or miss) their desired marks in terms of indicators and metrics. Some interviewees fit into both categories. The interviews were a mix of in-person and telephone conversations.

The first group of interviewees is made up of Emily Epley, executive director of Destination Cleveland County; Brownie Plaster, chairman of Destination Cleveland County; Stan Lowery, executive director of the Don Gibson Theatre; Henry Walston, chairman of the Vollis Simpson Whirligig Park steering committee and former chairman of the Wilson Downtown Development Corporation; Juan Logan, lead conservator for the Vollis Simpson Whirligig Park; James Wiseman, chairman of the board of the Newberry Opera House; and Debra Smith, executive director of the Newberry Opera House.

The second group of interviewees is comprised of Audrey Whetten, executive director of the Uptown Shelby Association; Rick Howell, Shelby city manager; Kimberly Van Dyk, Wilson’s downtown development director; and Rodger Lentz, Wilson’s chief planning and development director.

I also conducted an in-person interview with Wayne Martin, executive director of the North Carolina Arts Council (NCAC). Martin has worked at the NCAC since 1981 and has, in his own words, worked to make economic development one of the department’s primary focuses. The department provided funding to the Vollis Simpson Whirligig Park and has given guidance to Destination Cleveland County. Martin was able to give perspective both on the individual case studies and more generally on the theory of using arts and culture for small town revitalization and economic development.
Permission was granted by each interviewee to identify him or her by name and use their title in this paper. This permission was obtained prior to starting each interview, at the same time permission was requested to record each interview. All interviewees were asked if they agreed to be identified by name and title and to have their interview recorded. All interviewees acquiesced to each request.

Finally, I made site visits to Shelby and Wilson. These trips allowed me to obtain a better grasp of the scope of the projects as well as the impacts they have had on their respective areas. Since arts and culture-based projects do tend, for better or for worse, to judge themselves in part on quality of life metrics—“fuzzy concepts”15 of locational vibrancy, a concept explored a bit more later in this paper—I felt it crucial to experience the conditions in the downtowns firsthand where possible.

**Defining Success**

Reaching an understanding of what success means with arts and culture-based revitalization projects in small towns can be a tricky process. For one, arts and culture projects, and particularly those which could be called creative placemaking, are often associated with quality of life outcomes such as a having a more well-rounded place, increased community cohesion and increased social capital. These outcomes can be summed up by the term vibrancy. Outcomes like these are partially what is meant by the fuzzy concepts mentioned previously. They are notoriously hard to measure but are generally accepted as legitimate outcomes.16

The second difficulty with determining success has to do with unique nature of small towns. Metrics used in large places, including number of creative industry jobs created, employment rate changes, and number of arts organizations established are not always applicable.

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15 Gadwa Nicodemus 2013.
16 Ibid.
to small towns, at least not initially. One reason is scale—arts and culture revitalization projects are unlikely to employ enough people in a small town to make a dent in the unemployment rate, at least not directly. Another reason is that arts and culture projects in small towns are not necessarily done with the goal of creating more arts and culture organizations; rather, the goal is to bring visitors from outside who create enough demand for certain indicator businesses (such as restaurants and craft shops) to open.

ArtPlace has developed a set of vibrancy indicators it uses to assess its programs.\(^\text{17}\) Some of the indicators are useful to evaluate the success of the case studies in this paper. Several of the indicators focus on jobs, a metric with less primacy in these cases. Others, though, are related to business and mixed-use activity, metrics more in line with what interview subjects said were indicators they were seeking to address. The ArtPlace vibrancy indicators most appropriate for adapting to this paper are indicator businesses\(^\text{18}\), mixed use\(^\text{19}\) and independent businesses\(^\text{20}\). To these I added tourists visited and tourism revenues. This was concluded based on a combination of conversations with interview subjects and through my judgment regarding which metrics the projects in this paper could reasonably address. Investment and other development—admittedly a catchall category—is not addressed in the vibrancy indicators, but should be considered in the case studies in this paper. The metrics this paper will address are a combination of the appropriate ArtPlace vibrancy metrics and the stated goals of the projects in these case studies (essentially investment and other development). The metrics were collected from a combination

\(^{17}\) http://www.artplaceamerica.org/vibrancy-indicators/.
\(^{18}\) Defined as “businesses that represent destinations of choice for cultural, recreational, consumption or social activity…including firms in 45 selected industry codes including eating and drinking places, shops, personal service establishments and other businesses that cater to consumers.” http://www.artplaceamerica.org/vibrancy-indicators/
\(^{19}\) Defined as “the extent to which a particular area is dominated by residential activity or employment activity or whether it is a balance of the two…computed as the fraction of Census blocks with non-zero levels of reported employment and resident population.” http://www.artplaceamerica.org/vibrancy-indicators/.
\(^{20}\) Defined as “the number and share of local businesses that are not part of national chains.” http://www.artplaceamerica.org/vibrancy-indicators/.
of sources including interviewees, county tax records, newspaper accounts and other internet research.

To ignore intangible outcomes, though, would be to paint an incomplete picture. Although the fuzzy concepts associated with metrics on locational vibrancy—often cited as an outcome of arts and culture-based revitalization—have sometimes been criticized, the malleability of these concepts can make them appealing to a variety of stakeholders.\(^\text{21}\) However, reliance on such fuzzy theories of arts and culture revitalization and uncertainty over how to track metrics has made it difficult for decision-makers to feel confident about attempting such strategies.\(^\text{22}\) Clearly there is an attraction to the more difficult to measure aspects of vibrancy; the character of a place that conveys to the visitor a sense of momentum and that people care, and which makes visitors want to spend time and visit again. This is acutely important in small towns which can feel indistinguishable from each other.

Firsthand impressions from site visits to Shelby and Wilson is the first method employed to evaluate the intangible results of the projects. Spending the better part of a day in each downtown allowed for a diagnosis of each area’s well-being and how noticeable the arts and cultural projects felt in the downtowns. Careful attention was paid to the relative number of people walking around on the street, cars parked in the area, the physical condition of neighborhood buildings and whether or not local businesses had customers. These measures were used as proxies for each downtown’s intangible status and allowed for an experiential evaluation of the place.

The second method will involve data gleaned from the internet. In today’s digital age the internet serves as the ultimate source of publicity and visibility. Given that each of the projects in

\(^{21}\) Gadwa Nicodemus 2013.  
\(^{22}\) Markusen and Gadwa 2010.
the case studies seeks to attract non-local visitors, their internet presence is especially critical. Interviewees acknowledged the internet was a major source of marketing for their respective projects. Internet searches also provide unbiased search results. Thus internet search results may be one viable proxy for visibility and excitement— that is, how much people are talking about a project.

To appraise each project’s success in this regard I measured the following for each project: the number of hits resulting from an eponymous Google search; the number of Twitter followers; and the number of Facebook likes. Each project maintains an account on all platforms. These results were compared to a reference project to serve as a point of comparison. I selected the B.B. King Museum and Delta Interpretive Center in Indianola Mississippi as the reference project. I did so because it was one of the projects Destination Cleveland County used as a model for their own work. Its economic impacts in Indianola (a town of 10,271 as of 201323) have been described as “tremendous”24 since it opened in 2008. All internet data collection was performed from the same computer on the same date.

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23 US Census Bureau.
LITERATURE REVIEW

Arts and culture-based economic development has received significant academic attention in recent decades. Spurred on by the concept that the so-called creative class and other bohemians can be critical catalysts in neighborhood revitalization, increased economic activity and attracting other sources of human capital, cities have sought to provide the amenities thought to be critical in cultivating these demographics (Florida 2002). As economic development theory and practice has been drawn towards the idea of attracting people rather than firms, arts and culture have been placed front and center as desired amenities that cause people to want to live somewhere (Currid 2009). Arts and culture-based economic development strategies have thus become accepted, well-established policies deeply ingrained into the operations of city planning departments and other economic development actors in cities throughout the United States (Strom 2010).

Arts and culture-based economic development strategies recognize not only the importance of attracting people to relocate and live in a place but also the value of bringing in tourists who will spend money. So called cultural tourism, where visitors are enticed to an area based on some aspect of its history, heritage or social makeup, is seen as a key component of economic growth which offers communities a way to diversify their revenues (National Governors’ Association 2009).

These strategies also have come into favor with small towns, defined here as the United States Census Bureau’s urban cluster category, which is a place of between 2,500 and 50,000 residents. Such places often are interested in deploying arts and culture-based economic development programs as tools for economic and community development and neighborhood, community and downtown revitalization (Markusen and Gadwa 2010). Cultural facilities and
programming are considered to be a “particularly vibrant” form of locally-oriented growth potential for rural areas (Markusen 2007). The pioneering artist relocation program and subsequent creation of an arts district in Paducah, Kentucky in the early 2000s is held up as an enormously successful example of a smaller city using the arts to revitalize a neighborhood long plagued by poverty, drugs and crime (Tartoni 2007). Other examples of successful arts and cultural facilities and programs in small and rural areas abound (Markusen 2007 and Markusen and King 2003).

A type of arts and culture economic development which is particularly suited to small towns is creative placemaking. Creative placemaking involves partners from the public, private, non-profit and community sectors shaping the physical and social character of a neighborhood or town (Markusen and Gadwa 2010). It refers to efforts to rejuvenate downtown spaces and structures with arts and cultural activities while improving local business viability (Markusen and Gadwa 2010). Creative placemaking has emerged mainly in the past decade, and while interpretations of its meaning have differed, a general agreement has emerged that it is focused on place-based arts initiatives with economic and social results (Gadwa Nicodemus 2013).

One particular attraction of creative placemaking—and arts and culture-based economic development generally—for small towns is that it allows them to cope with a decline in manufacturing and other industries by providing new opportunities for endogenous growth (Gadwa Nicodemus 2013). Cultural centers, festivals and other arts-based strategies are being credited with reviving empty downtowns by bringing in new visitors and emphasizing reusing vacant downtown buildings (Markusen and Gadwa 2010).

However, significant obstacles remain in implementing creative placemaking projects in small towns. (From this point forward the terms creative placemaking and arts-based economic
development or revitalization projects will be used interchangeably.) Difficulties in creating partnerships, skepticism from community leaders and citizens and trouble developing performance metrics are some of the primary ones (Markusen and Gadwa 2010). For small towns with fewer resources, getting past these obstacles can seem daunting.

Further, while the literature on arts and culture-based economic development in urban centers is extensive, the scholarship on arts and culture-based economic development in small towns has some salient holes. Solutions for the obstacles mentioned above are largely absent from the literature. The result is that there is not a good framework for evaluating if pursuing an arts and culture-based economic development strategy is worthwhile for small towns. The tradeoffs involved in funding arts and culture-based programs versus other economic development programs for small towns are largely unexplored (Markusen and King 2003).

In fact, the arts and cultural literature is almost entirely devoid of any discussion of cost-benefit evaluations and includes scant acknowledgement of the opportunity costs of planning for arts and culture-based economic development (Markusen 2007). One study of arts-based economic development in rural North Carolina found that significant challenges in such planning efforts included difficulties in understanding the costs and benefits of an arts-based strategy as opposed to other methods of economic and community development (Fleming 2005).

Understanding what makes arts and culture-based economic development strategies successful and how to effectively commit resources to them is of immediate concern in small towns. Small town economic development practitioners face limited resources and options. Further, with an ever-greater number of municipalities and regions competing for a finite amount of participation and spending on arts and cultural attractions, the race to maximize said
participation and spending involves ever-increasing amounts of money and effort (McCarthy and Jinnett 2001).

This project will seek to clarify when a small town should attempt an arts and culture-based economic development or revitalization project and how such a project can be implemented successfully. The wide range of benefits attributable in the literature to arts and culture-based economic development can leave economic development practitioners in small urban and rural areas with an unclear understanding of what goals they should be pursuing with such strategies (Fleming 2005). An incomplete list of the benefits of arts and culture-based economic development drawn from the literature includes everything from the easily quantifiable to the extraordinarily vague: real estate appreciation (Strom 2010), increased tourism and investment (Tartoni 2007), regaining residents who have moved away (Markusen 2007), increased community engagement and neighborhood revitalization (Stern and Seifert 2010), attracting human capital (Davis 2011), expanding social networks (Fleming 2005) and higher quality of life (Sheppard, Oehler and Benjamin 2006).

The intangible nature of many of these goals causes a challenge for economic development practitioners seeking a clear measure of return on arts and culture-based economic development strategies. Many of these intangible benefits are essentially impossible to quantify in traditional cost-benefit methods (Dupuis 1985) and there is no established way to track them. This inability to monitor certain returns may discourage economic development practitioners from implementing arts and culture-based economic development strategies, particularly in small towns with limited capacity (Fleming 2005).

Similarly, there is uncertainty over the costs involved in arts and culture-based economic development strategies. An incomplete list of those costs includes: providing tax incentives and
advertising (Tartoni 2007), establishing connections to arts organizations, state officials and artists themselves (Markusen, Schrock and Cameron 2004), infrastructure improvements (Davis 2011) and providing technical assistance, marketing support and underwriting events for artists to interact (Markusen 2007). For this paper costs will refer to the different steps in the process of implementing a creative placemaking strategy. Thus they may not always refer to monetary costs. There is confusion among practitioners as to which of these steps they may have to undertake. An accurate accounting of them for creative placemaking projects in small towns has not been produced.

These uncertainties produce demonstrable knowledge gaps. Markusen and Gadwa posit that economic development researchers and practitioners should understand the risks, impacts and opportunity costs of any strategy, as well as the investments, revenues and expenditures patterns associated with each strategy (Markusen and Gadwa 2010). They also find that failure to specify goals and reliance on “fuzzy theories” regarding quality of life metrics create difficulty in evaluating performance outcomes, thus making it challenging for decision-makers to proceed confidently with arts and culture-based economic development strategies (Markusen and Gadwa 2010).

Markusen and Gadwa’s “efficiency norm” in assessing economic development strategies requires that plans be judged by the balance of benefits over costs and by alternative uses of public funds and staff time (Markusen and Gadwa 2010). But as this literature review indicates, the proper methods for comparing benefits and costs for arts and culture-based economic development strategies have not been fully formed. There is also incomplete knowledge as to when these strategies can be successfully deployed. With economic development practitioners in
small towns more strapped for time and money than those in large municipalities, this uncertainty hits even harder.

As this project deals with arts and culture-based economic development and gauging its potential value to small towns, it is important to provide a definition of arts and culture-based economic development that fits the goals of downtown revitalization and economic development. The definition used here is borrowed from Mt. Auburn Associates and Regional Technology Strategies, two consulting firms who have contributed influential work and ideas to the field. The firms use the term “creative economy,” which refers to enterprises, programs and activities that “contribute to the production and marketing of economic goods and services that distinguish themselves by qualities associated with aesthetics, authenticity or culture…in which the experience that is associated with the good adds substantially to its economic value and market potential” (Mt. Auburn Associates, Regional Technology Strategies and Handmade in America 2009).

This definition is appropriate because this project is interested in the costs and benefits of attaining economic value from arts and culture. It sets arts and culture as a defined economic development strategy against which alternative economic development strategies may be compared. Many strategies can go under the umbrella of arts and culture-based economic development; they include dedicated artist housing, artist centers and subsidized gallery space (Markusen and Gadwa 2010). This paper will focus on downtown revitalization strategies built around arts and culture. The particular focus is on strategies which use arts and culture as the vehicle for either filling vacant downtown space or repurposing a prominent downtown structure.
UPTOWN SHELBY: THE DON GIBSON THEATRE AND EARL SCRUGGS CENTER

The Don Gibson Theatre opened on Washington Street in the Uptown section of Shelby, North Carolina in November 2009. Gibson, a Shelby native, was a country and pop crooner who became a “reliable hitmaker” in the 1950s and 1960s. He scored eleven top ten songs from 1958 to 1961 and stayed active well into the 1970s. His namesake theater, meanwhile, hosts upwards of forty shows and concerts annually (in addition to frequent movie showings) by the likes of Ralph Stanley, Travis Tritt and Los Lonely Boys.

Following the success of the Don Gibson Theatre, the Earl Scruggs Center opened in the vacant Cleveland County Courthouse on Lafayette Street in Uptown in January 2014. The museum explores the history of the region and the career of Scruggs, the Shelby native whose banjo playing “influenced generations of musicians and helped shape the sound of 20th century country music.”

The Conditions: textiles lead to influence and later ebbing

“It was like Chinese water torture. This had closed, that had closed. How sad it would be to watch this town die, and it was dying. I could not let my grandchildren grow up in a town where no one did anything about that.”

26 Ibid.
Such was the state of Uptown Shelby by the turn of the 20th century. Historically the economic, social and physical center of the city of Shelby—itself the seat of Cleveland County in western North Carolina—Uptown had fallen on hard times, mirroring the decline seen in small textile towns throughout the region. While much of Cleveland County had been feeling the dual pinches of economic and population decline (Figure 1), the pain in Uptown was among the most acute. Composed of a grid pattern eight streets wide by eight streets tall, Uptown watched as retail anchors such as Belk, Sears and JCPenney left the enclave in the 1980s in favor of new strip malls near the Highway 74 bypass a few miles away from Uptown.29

While some local retail held on in Uptown through the 1980s and into the 1990s, the signing of the North American Free Trade Agreement in 1994 destroyed what was left of the once-prosperous textile industry in Shelby and sent Uptown into a freefall of closures and abandonment. (Over 4,000 textile jobs were lost in Cleveland County between 1998 and 2003.)30

Rick Howell, Shelby’s city manager since 2005 who worked in nearby Boiling Springs for

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30 http://clevelandcc.mycareerfocus.org/2014/06/02/emerging-industries-cleveland-county/.
nearly fifteen years prior to that, said of Uptown around the year 2000, “The streets were pretty quiet then, seven days a week.”

It had not always been so in Shelby and Uptown. By the closing decades of the 19th century Cleveland County established itself as a successful textile-producing region, and Shelby was where that success most manifested itself. Shelby’s stature grew concurrently with Cleveland County’s rapid population growth between 1880 and 1950 (Figure 2). Shelby’s economy was built on a handful of major textile factories owned by a few well-established local families. These factories were the town’s lifeblood during this time, providing the vast majority of jobs.

Political influence also grew out of this economic and population boom. The so-called “Shelby Dynasty” spawned several state, local and federal government officials who hailed from Shelby. The most famous of the group were the Webb brothers (James and E.Y.), O. Max Gardner and Clyde Hoey. Members of the group, related by either blood or marriage, served in numerous influential government posts, including but not limited to the North Carolina State

Figure 2: Cleveland County, NC Population

Source: US Census Bureau, Social Explorer Table SE:T1, Total Population and City Center Master Plan, Shelby

32 Ibid.
Senate, the North Carolina Superior Court, both chambers of the United States Congress and as governor of North Carolina.\textsuperscript{33}

As Cleveland County was blossoming in the early 20\textsuperscript{th} century, so was Uptown. Nearly all of the Shelby Dynasty lived and worked in the area, influencing other prominent businessmen, industrialists and retailers to also locate in the area.\textsuperscript{34} Considerable new construction sprang up in Uptown, particularly in the 1920s and 1930s when notable structures like the Rogers Theatre and Masonic Temple were built.\textsuperscript{35} As the cotton industry continued to thrive in Cleveland County—production rose from 8,000 bales per year around the turn of the century to 80,000 per year in the late 1920s\textsuperscript{36}—Uptown’s fortunes did as well. By the time Cleveland County cotton production peaked at 83,500 bales per year in 1948\textsuperscript{37} Uptown was “the center of the universe. All the town’s lawyers, doctors and bankers had offices there. There was a lot of retail. It was a very vibrant, busy area.”\textsuperscript{38}

The second half of the 20\textsuperscript{th} century was not as kind to both Shelby and Uptown. The cotton industry—stung by a combination of drought, insect infestation and government acreage controls—declined drastically in the postwar decades. By 1975 Cleveland County produced just 1,900 bales of cotton per year—a staggering drop from the 83,500 bales just twenty seven years earlier.\textsuperscript{39} At the same time, strip malls began opening in Shelby but outside Uptown, leading to the exodus of retailers alluded to earlier. Both Uptown and Shelby were already in perilous condition by the time of the 1994 NAFTA signing. The trade pact only exacerbated that scenario,

\textsuperscript{33} http://www.nps.gov/nr/travel/shelby/dynasty.htm.
\textsuperscript{34} http://www.nps.gov/nr/travel/shelby/cen.htm.
\textsuperscript{35} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{36} http://www.nps.gov/nr/travel/shelby/cen.htm.
\textsuperscript{37} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{38} Howell, R. (20, January 2015). Telephone interview.
\textsuperscript{39} http://www.nps.gov/nr/travel/shelby/history.htm.
as the remaining textile mill owners sold their plants or downsized significantly. For a town that had paid its bills and sent its children to school on textile labor, the impact was harsh. Shelby’s small population and relatively undiversified economy amplified the effect yet more.

The beginning of the 21st century continued these trends, especially in Uptown. While Shelby actually gained population in the 1990s and even into the 2000s (Figure 1) Cleveland County’s unemployment rate remained above that of North Carolina and the country for much of the decade before sharply increasing around the year 2000 (Figure 3). This trend played a role in the continued disinvestment happening in Uptown. Parcels and storefronts lay unoccupied for years as many types of tenants typically considered vital to a thriving downtown—restaurants, retail and other services, primarily—continued to shut their doors or relocate to the outskirts of town. “It was common to look at the sidewalks during the day and see no one on them,” said Howell.

Figure 3: Unemployment Rate


Decision to Revitalize: the arts and architecture

It was amid this milieu of disinvestment and a declining Uptown tax base that the individuals who would eventually form Destination Cleveland County (DCC) began meeting. The core group of about ten to fifteen people, fed up with the deterioration and dilapidation that was rampant in Uptown and at the same time cognizant that much of Shelby’s future would be tied to having a strong tax base in Uptown, began brainstorming ideas that could revive Uptown.  

Crucially, the group was composed entirely of locals from the region, including the Cleveland County manager at the time, the nephew of Earl Scruggs and Brownie Plaster. Plaster, a Shelby resident since the 1970s, was the former director of the Cleveland County Historic Preservation Commission. Through her work there she had become intimately familiar with the Cleveland County Courthouse and the State Theatre, both in Uptown and the future homes of the Earl Scruggs Center and Don Gibson Theatre, respectively. Her knowledge of Shelby and Uptown’s heritage, specific familiarity with the two facilities and social capital in Shelby and Cleveland County would provide DCC with the driving force so integral to revitalizing small city downtowns through arts and culture. (Plaster would eventually be named to the Order of the Long Leaf Pine, one of North Carolina’s highest civilian awards, for her service. The designation, which honors public has service, has also been bestowed upon Maya Angelou, Charles Kuralt, Billy Graham and approximately 15,000 others.)  

The fact that all of the citizen task force was comprised of locals also proved valuable, as it lent the group credibility and access to people and knowledge that public officials without such deep connections would not have had.

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41 Plaster, B. (16, January 2015). Personal interview.
At about the same time Shelby officials were beginning to plan for an Uptown revitalization attempt themselves. The city commissioned a new master plan for Shelby in the early 2000s, and much of it focused on Uptown. When the resulting City Center Master Plan was released in 2004 it found Uptown had an annual retail leakage of $22.6 million for Uptown’s primary trade area (which had a population of 53,970 at the time) and another $335.7 million per year for Uptown’s secondary trade area (with an additional 63,690 people at the time).43

These findings were both deflating and encouraging to local officials. On the one hand, Uptown was losing out on tremendous sums of money each year. On the other hand, there was opportunity. Leakage means that supply is not meeting demand for a given area, so consumers are leaving that area to meet their demand. If Uptown could draw just a modest percentage of that unmet demand it would go a long way to breathing life back into the area, officials thought. Furthermore, the master plan found leakage for the primary trade area was especially severe for just the types of retail that would work well in a downtown area: specialty retail such as book stores, coffee shops, music stores and restaurants.44 Clearly, town officials felt, it would be necessary to bring in outsiders to meet some of that demand.45 The question was how to draw them to Uptown.

At this time—prior to the publication of the master plan, at least—Shelby’s citizen task force was unaware of just how dire Uptown’s situation was. Their initial concern was actually just to find a better use for the Cleveland County Courthouse, the 1907 limestone structure directly in the center of both Uptown and Cleveland County. In the 1970s and 1980s the facility housed Cleveland County offices, but sometime in the 1980s a county museum jointly funded by Shelby and Cleveland County popped up in the building. While the county relocated their offices

43 City Center Master Plan Shelby, North Carolina. 2007.
44 Ibid.
45 Howell, R. (20, January 2015). Personal interview.
from the courthouse around 2000, the museum kept right on collecting materials, eventually accumulating nearly 17,000 objects—many as trivial as old matchbooks. Eventually the museum’s board stopped caring for the facility and the county manager locked the doors, effectively leaving the courthouse dormant. The courthouse—architecturally one of the most distinguished buildings in Shelby (see Image 1, next page)—sat unused beginning in 2004.47

“Travelers would stop here on their way to or from Asheville or Charlotte and would look at the courthouse and say, ‘Why don’t you all do something about that building?’ We had quit looking at it. We had just gotten inured to all that,” Plaster said.48

DCC honed in on the facility. At first the group was interested in seeing whether the museum could be brought back to a condition that would attract visitors. The group hired a consultant from North Carolina State University to assess both the condition of the courthouse and museum and that of Uptown Shelby more generally. His conclusion startled them: not only is the museum in terrible shape, he told them, but Uptown is in much the same condition. Unless drastic measures were taken, he warned, “Shelby was going to die.”49

The convergence of these two processes—DCC’s formation and interest in the courthouse museum and the publication of the master plan—led to a recognition among both the citizen task force and certain city officials of the need to revitalize. After formally establishing itself as DCC in 2006, the organization turned its focus to the courthouse and the State Theatre, a city-owned 1939 art deco cinema that had fallen into disrepair and had been on the city’s demolition chopping block for years, as viable locations for projects.

49 Whetten, A. (9, January 2015). Telephone interview.
This was one DCC’s first important actions that DCC took—identifying Uptown’s existing assets. The courthouse and the State Theatre, in spite of their vibrant former lives and aesthetic qualities, had been cast off as relics that had outlived their useful lives. People in Shelby did not think about them much at all, and if they did they certainly did not consider them as conduits for revitalization.

For small towns the process of accurately inventorying and understanding the assets a town does have is essential to an arts and culture-based revitalization or economic development project. In places with limited resources these projects are not likely to be showered with money and government support, at least during the exploratory stages. What revitalization and economic
development resources do exist are probably earmarked for other projects. In downtowns with declining tax bases the money and resources often will be unavailable for more unorthodox approaches like arts and culture-based ones. This makes it all the more imperative for a community to work with what it has.

Obtaining an accurate inventory of Uptown’s assets also proved crucial in DCC’s next steps. Led by Plaster, group members took trips to Nashville, Raleigh and various small towns to observe firsthand projects that had positively benefitted downtowns. On these visits DCC met with people who asked what made Shelby unique. At first DCC members answered with what they commonly associated Shelby with—food, usually, either barbeque or livermush. Those answers were met with the consistent response that plenty of other small towns had the same things. Finally someone hit upon Earl Scruggs and Don Gibson, two influential musicians born and raised in Shelby. The idea of developing revitalization projects built around the musicians gradually gained traction among DCC, based on the notion that they were identifiable personalities with strong connections to Shelby.  

Using arts and culture for revitalization in Uptown was appealing for other reasons as well. First, it would provide Shelby with a strong quality of life argument to make when recruiting businesses to Uptown and to greater Shelby. For a town like Shelby, which competes against numerous other towns in Charlotte’s secondary ring for businesses, town officials felt that arts and cultural projects could provide a leg up, all other things equal.

The second reason the idea appealed was that it represented a clear break from the past. Part of the decision to use the musicians—and, more broadly, to use the arts as a revitalization tool—represented acceptance that manufacturing and textiles were not coming back to Shelby.

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the way they had been. Uptown was going to have to reinvent itself if it was to regain some of its old glory and bring investment back. Using the musicians to represent that—especially Earl Scruggs—provided an apt parallel. “Scruggs was a man of musical reinvention in his career. We also figured that to survive, we were going to have to do something different. What was done before is not really an option,” said Emily Epley, DCC’s executive director.

Another factor that led DCC to an arts and culture-based revitalization strategy was that it simply seemed more possible than other options. The town realized that pursuing other oft-discussed economic development methods like going after a minor league baseball team were extremely unlikely to happen, especially with so little development in Uptown. The arts and culture projects represented an opportunity to build using assets already in town, rather than forcing an exogenous strategy to happen when its chances of success were likely quite low.

The lesson could well apply for other small towns, places where there is frequently some existing culture, whether it is historical heritage, craftsmanship or local food. When projects involving these assets are executed well and when it is established that there is an outside market of people who will come into town and spend money on the assets, building from within may be the best strategy. For Shelby, the next phase involved determining if in fact that market existed and what would be required to exploit it.

Execution: sharpening the vision

By this point—2006—DCC’s primary objective was to conduct enough research that they could say with reasonable confidence if their plans might succeed. The ideas at this point revolved around renovating, reopening and rebranding the State Theatre as the Don Gibson Theatre and putting a museum about Earl Scruggs in the Cleveland County Courthouse. The ideas required getting permission from the Gibson and Scruggs families. (Gibson died in 2003
while Scruggs was alive during the process, passing away in 2012.) Each family was skeptical at first, but DCC felt if they could provide evidence that the projects would benefit Uptown and Shelby that the families would sign on.

With sketches of the projects in mind, DCC set out on a second series of bus trips in early 2007 to small towns that had done similar projects. The group sought to involve a broad cross-section of Shelby and Cleveland County residents. DCC took out advertisements for the bus trips in local newspapers and sent invitations to Cleveland County commissioners. A few local officials, including Howell and the Cleveland County manager at the time, joined the trips. The destinations included the B.B. King Museum and Delta Interpretive Center in Indianola, Mississippi; the Ava Gardner Museum in Smithfield, North Carolina; the Carter Family Fold in Hiltons, Virginia; the Levine Museum of the New South in Charlotte; the Paramount Center for the Arts in Bristol, Tennessee; and the Newberry Opera House in Newberry, South Carolina.

The locations mostly represented towns similar in size to Shelby that had used an arts or culture project as the centerpiece of downtown revitalization. Like DCC’s vision for their own projects, the projects sought to capture out of town heritage tourists, increase investment, spur new business openings and increase vibrancy. The predominant common thread that stood out to the Shelby contingent on the trips was that each project and revitalization strategy was unique. There was no one solution or process that would fit every small town. Each had worked to project a sense of authenticity, meaning they revolved around something or someone with a connection to the community. They were not developments like casinos or athletic facilities, sterile and impersonal developments with no inherent meaning to an area. Rather, they tapped into sources of pride and value, things that visitors could not get from any indistinguishable

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52 Howell, R. (20, January 2015). Telephone interview.
small town. Also, most projects celebrated not just a person, but incorporated some aspect of the history and heritage of their town or region as well.

With this inspiration DCC started looking into the financial feasibility of their ideas. They took their plans to Wayne Martin, currently the executive director of the North Carolina Arts Council (NCAC) and at the time the department’s senior program director for community arts development. The NCAC gave DCC a bit of grant money to get started and helped them connect with the North Carolina Rural Center, which chipped in with a $25,000 Economic Incentive grant. (That grant eventually grew to about $400,000).\(^{53}\)

DCC used that seed money to fund an audience analysis and strategic plan done by an independent consultant and an economic impact study done by nearby Gardner-Webb University’s business school. The impact study estimated that together the two projects could bring $180 million of total economic activity to Cleveland County in their first ten years of operation and would produce 200-250 additional jobs in the county.\(^{54}\) (The study was revised in 2011 and found the projected impacts to be slightly lower than the original numbers, but still largely accurate.) A separate analysis was done on the feasibility of raising the anticipated capital—thought to be about $5.1 million at the time.\(^{55}\)

These research processes were of particular importance for a small town with a downtown clinging to life. The city council and county commissioners were not willing to put tax dollars into DCC’s projects, so there was little margin for error with regard to fundraising. To compete for heritage tourists—a bloc not drawn to Uptown in a long time—every duck needed to be in a row. DCC felt they had to boil the process of understanding what draws heritage tourists down to a science. Not only that, they wished to learn what else heritage travelers wanted to do

\(^{55}\) Plaster, B. (16, January 2015). Personal interview.
in a small town and where else they spent their money. Since DCC’s projects were relying on a potentially difficult fundraising campaign, getting permission from the Gibson and Scruggs families and convincing the city and county to allow them to rent their respective properties, the research had to be convincing.

But the research processes also intrinsically strengthened the projects. They forced DCC to cast a realistic gaze on whether their projects were financially feasible. It also required them to determine—without putting on rose colored glasses—if their assets (Gibson, Scruggs and the two facilities) could be turned into projects strong enough to attract heritage tourists. Answering these questions forced DCC into a keen understanding of their community assets and what they wanted their projects to be. The result was that the projects were not pie-in-the-sky dreams or quixotic plans with no documentation to back up their arguments: they were grounded in reality, and the group had the numbers to back up their case.

All this was enough to convince the Gibson and Scruggs families, who signed licensing agreements in 2008. But there was still another issue: healthy skepticism among some community members, both in Shelby and the rest of Cleveland County. Part of this, Howell, speculated, sprung from the historic divide between Shelby and the more rural parts of Cleveland County. While Shelby has traditionally been the center of economic and social power in Cleveland County, the rural hamlets in the rest of the county oftentimes felt maligned and ignored by its larger neighbor.

There was also the issue that many people, both in Shelby and Cleveland County, simply did not identify with Don Gibson and Earl Scruggs anymore. To them, Shelby’s history was well-represented by the museum that had been in the courthouse. The town’s true assets, those which had the capability to draw in outside dollars, had fallen out of favor and were seen as
unfashionable vestiges of time past. Bill Ferris, a professor at the University of North Carolina and director of UNC’s Center for the Study of the American South who had joined the projects as a consultant, warned Plaster the town needed to embrace what could bring it success. “[Ferris] said, ‘You know what Shelby’s problem is? You are putting millworkers’ names on prominent buildings.’ Hearing that was hard for the establishment to swallow,” Plaster commented.56

DCC took two measures to counter these obstacles in early 2008. The first was a decision to broaden the scope of the Earl Scruggs Center. The initial idea had been to just build a museum to Earl Scruggs. After the second series of bus trips and the research processes, DCC had elected to incorporate elements of the heritage and history of the North Carolina Foothills region into the museum, but still have the majority of the museum be about Scruggs. But after hearing the community’s reticence to focusing on Scruggs and with input from Ferris and employees at the Levine Museum of the New South, DCC landed on what would become the facility’s official tagline: “Music and stories from the American South”. The decision was made to tell Scruggs’ life story as part of a larger explorations of the South’s cotton industry, musical and ethnic traditions, economic history and social conditions. Portions dedicated solely to Scruggs’ life would comprise only a quarter of the museum’s displays.57

The second action was a series of five community meetings held throughout Cleveland County over a two month period. Armed with the new vision for the Earl Scruggs Center, DCC garnered community support from all over Cleveland County, including the outlying rural areas. Largely satisfied that the project was not focused exclusively on Shelby—and intrigued by the projected tax revenue set to flow to Cleveland County—opposition to the projects petered out to

56 Plaster, B. (16, January 2015). Personal interview.
the point where city officials and county commissioners agreed to lease both the State Theatre and Cleveland County Courthouse to DCC in late 2008.

The final step was to line up the necessary money for the projects. DCC’s capital campaign began in 2007, and by 2009 it had lined up about $4 million for the renovation of the State Theatre as the Don Gibson Theatre. That process required nearly all of the $4 million, which came evenly between private donations and loans and public funds, nearly all of which took the form of grant money.\footnote{Epley, E. (13, January 2015). Telephone interview.} The Earl Scruggs Center had a similar fundraising process, albeit with more public funds. The project—which ended up costing $6.2 million, taking the
final tally for the two projects to roughly $10 million, about twice as much as way initially thought to be required—received $1.5 million from the county to spruce up the courthouse. As the courthouse was (and still is) county property, all parties this was an appropriate measure.

DCC also was awarded a $1.5 million grant from the federal government’s Economic Development Administration, in addition to some financial support at the state level.59

With capital in hand, lease agreements from the city and county, donations of artifacts from both the Gibson and Scruggs families as well as other sources and a new executive director to run the Don Gibson Theatre, the Don Gibson Theatre opened in November 2009 and the Earl Scruggs Center followed in January 2014.

The Impacts: Uptown since 2009

Developing metrics for arts and culture revitalization and creative placemaking projects can sometimes be tricky. For small towns like Shelby and neighborhoods like Uptown, measures like population growth or job and wage increases may not be the most appropriate metrics to track with projects like the Don Gibson Theatre and Earl Scruggs Center.

Indeed, the projects were never intended to replace all the jobs lost to textile decline. From the onset the goal was bringing in tourist dollars (in addition to money from local visitors) and leveraging those revenues to staunch Uptown’s decline. Practically, this meant tracking businesses that opened or expanded in the area and the number of visitors. On a more nebulous level, though, it meant monitoring how the neighborhood’s character changed: were there more people in the streets? Was there activity in the evenings? What was the perception of Uptown, both among local and outsiders?

The adapted ArtPlace vibrancy indicators and tourists visited and tourism revenues for Uptown will be examined since plans were announced for the Don Gibson Theatre and Earl Scruggs Center. The foremost metric to measure in Shelby’s case is revenue from tourism. These data are available at the countywide level, and while their movement cannot be definitively linked to the Don Gibson Theatre, Earl Scruggs Center or any other factor, their increase during the projects’ implementation and planning phases and initial years of operation are conspicuous. As seen in Table 1, tourism has waxed and wanted in Cleveland County during the past decade and a half. The three most recent years data are available, though, have shown steady gains. Even accounting for the fact that those years represent emergence from the recession, they still exhibit some of the most consistent gains since the year 2000. The Don Gibson Theatre opened in
November 2009, and while the Earl Scruggs Center did not open until January 2014, plans for the facility were known since around 2006.

Table 1: Cleveland County Tourism Revenues

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Cleveland County Tourism Revenues (millions)</th>
<th>Change from previous term</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2012</td>
<td>$92.44</td>
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<tr>
<td>2011</td>
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<tr>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>2000</td>
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<td>0.58%</td>
</tr>
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Business activity in Uptown also picked up during this period. Figures were provided by the Uptown Shelby Association, the city’s downtown development nonprofit. Although data prior to 2008 could not be verified by the organization—mostly due to lax recordkeeping prior to then—each year since 2008 has seen a net business gain in Uptown. The figures are summarized in Table 2.

Table 2: Business Activity in Uptown Shelby

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>New Businesses</th>
<th>Businesses Closed</th>
<th>Net Business Gain</th>
<th>Business Expansion</th>
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<tr>
<td>2008-2009</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>1</td>
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<td>2013-2014</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Personal correspondence with Audrey Whetten, Uptown Shelby Association executive director.
Again, it is difficult to isolate these occurrences from a potential resurgence after the recession. The lack of data prior to 2008 also complicates this. I have thus relied on qualitative findings to fill in the gaps. While comparison data are difficult to obtain, Uptown Main Street’s executive director—in her post since 2011—noted that “levels of foot traffic and customer activity have undoubtedly increased in the last five years, and especially in the last two. I would say with absolute confidence that our storefront occupancy rate is higher now than in 2009.” This echoes comments heard from all interviewees—a biased group, potentially, but one that had no qualms criticizing many aspects of life in Shelby—as well as impressions from a site visit. On a recent Friday afternoon Uptown was not quite bustling, but the streets were far from deserted. Groups of visitors were in the Earl Scruggs Center, and a local pizza parlor—opened in 2009 by a Shelby native who left only to return years later—was mostly full at lunch time.

The mix of businesses in Uptown has also diversified, an outcome stakeholders have deemed a success. A microbrewery is set to open up in summer 2015 in a downtown storefront not far from the Earl Scruggs Center that has sat vacant for ten years. Similarly, an outdoors store is in the works for around the same time. A wine shop that opened the same week as the Earl Scruggs Center’s grand opening moved into a space nearly four times as large in late 2013 and began serving beer and wine at a small bar in-store. None of these retail types existed in Uptown previously. They are also all independent businesses (i.e. not part of a national chain, per the ArtPlace percentage of independent businesses vibrancy indicator). A new farmers’ market is set to open in Uptown, a development that Rick Howell said “never in my wildest dreams would have been built had Don Gibson and Earl Scruggs not gotten off the ground.”

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60 Whetten, A. (9, January 2015). Telephone interview.
61 Ibid.
Restaurants in Uptown report a 25% to 35% increase in sales on nights with an event at the Don Gibson Theatre.62 In its first year of operation the Earl Scruggs Center had around 10,000 visitors, just 10% of whom were local. Those 10,000 visitors came from forty three states and nine foreign countries.63 The Don Gibson Theatre was awarded the best public-private partnership by the North Carolina Department of Commerce at the 2011 North Carolina Main Street Conference.

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Image 3: Warren Street, Uptown Shelby

Photo credit: Adam Levin
Mixed-use results are not quite as encouraging. About one hundred people live in Uptown, a figure that has stayed steady for about a decade.\textsuperscript{64} While this figure is not entirely discouraging for a town Shelby’s size, the fact that bringing more residents downtown is a goal of Shelby officials and its stagnant growth in the past decade reveal that more can be done on this mark. Although new housing in Uptown is a priority among city officials, there is none currently planned, nor has any been built since the Don Gibson Theatre’s opening. Retail openings in Uptown have dominated residential openings.

Beyond the quantifiable changes there was a feeling among interviewees that something else, something perhaps even more consequential, is happening in Uptown. Interviewees related that impacts are visible in terms of vehicles parked on the street and people being on the sidewalks.\textsuperscript{65} Audrey Whetten, Uptown Shelby Association’s executive director, was thrilled when Shelby’s police chief told her in 2013 that his department was stepping up foot patrols in the evenings. Whetten—herself a recent college graduate—spoke of the idea of small towns having latent tiers of “coolness,” ineffable qualities that define towns to outsiders.

“Are you dying? Are you totally dead? Are you trying but it’s pitiful? Are you a snazzy small town? Visitors pick up on, ‘Oh, this place is cool. I’m surprised that place is here, I thought Shelby was dumpy and full of crime.’ That’s usually the reaction we get,” she said.

A site visit to Uptown somewhat affirmed these impressions. On a Friday afternoon in January the streets were not empty. Although they were not busy enough to be considered bustling, there was certainly a noticeable amount of people out and about. During a tour of the Earl Scruggs Center there were approximately twenty other visitors, including a group of senior citizens from Charlotte, one of them a repeat visitor. Checks on a local coffee shop, beer and

\textsuperscript{64} Whetten, A. (9, January 2015). Telephone interview.
\textsuperscript{65} Howell, R. (20, January 2015). Telephone interview.
wine store and antiques and knickknacks shop showed customers in each, although each was only in the single digits. The proprietors of each shop were on hand, and anecdotally they related their pleasure at being located close to both the Earl Scruggs Center and Don Gibson Theatre. As mentioned earlier, the pizza parlor was mostly full at lunchtime.

The quality of the offerings at the pizza restaurant also represents a new change in Uptown, according to interviews. It has several craft beers on tap and a live music schedule, both things not seen in Uptown Shelby in recent years. “If you had been in the restaurant that was in that spot before, very few people would have been there after nine. Now, you have live music there frequently, and the place is going to be packed,” said Howell.

Internet metrics suggest both the Don Gibson Theatre and Earl Scruggs Center are reaching an audience. Table 3 shows that the Don Gibson Theatre has the most Google search result hits of any of the projects except for the B.B. King Museum. The Earl Scruggs Center has almost as many Twitter followers as the B.B. King Museum despite being open six fewer years.

*Table 3: Internet Metrics (as of February 25, 2015)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Don Gibson Theatre</th>
<th>Earl Scruggs Center</th>
<th>Whirligig Park</th>
<th>Newberry Opera House</th>
<th>B.B. King Museum</th>
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<td><strong>Google</strong></td>
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Source: google.com, facebook.com, twitter.com.

*Lessons from the Process*

What lessons can be gleaned from Shelby’s experience with the Don Gibson Theatre and Earl Scruggs Center? Close reading can provide the reader with a set of best practices in order to help towns in similar positions replicate a version of Shelby’s process and optimize their chances of picking a winning arts and culture-based revitalization strategy.
The presence of a well-connected, local leader as a driving force behind the projects was integral to their success. Plaster, a Shelby resident since the 1970s, has a decades-long history of volunteering on civic projects in Cleveland County. Her credibility and relationships allowed DCC access to skeptical county commissioners, city councilmembers and locals. This was especially important for these arts and culture projects. There was no precedent for these projects in Shelby, and some expressed trepidation that tourists could ever be convinced to visit the town.
Image 4: The Don Gibson Theatre

Photo credit: Adam Levin
Momentum for the projects like would have died out early on had the ideas been championed by someone with shallower community connections and with less sway.

Not only was Plaster’s involvement a boon to the projects’ odds of becoming reality, but having the initial task force comprised of other visible Cleveland County locals opened further doors. The task force included JT Scruggs, Earl Scruggs’ nephew and a lifelong Cleveland County resident. Notably, JT Scruggs himself has no special connection to music—he works as a manager at a car manufacturing plant in Cleveland County. His support of the project, as a prominent local who works in one of the region’s typically blue collar industries, lent credence to the new, novel revitalization strategies. The rest of the task force was likewise made up of locals, including Rick Howell and a former Cleveland County manager. Their support, as government officials, embodied the backing for new strategies by stalwarts of Shelby and Cleveland County’s economic development old guard.

The task force consciously worked to build community support and bridge the divide between Shelby and other parts of Cleveland County. The five community meetings that the group held were across the county, in towns as small as Lawndale (population 606 as of 2010). Even if these communication attempts were not always successful they represented a conscious effort to make the case that the projects were not solely for the benefit of Shelby. Another example of relationship building among the community is the Don Gibson Theatre’s Marquee Club, a partnership with eighteen regional restaurants and hotels that allows them to offer discounted and advance tickets to shows.

The decision to make the Earl Scruggs Center’s exhibits not only about the musician, but to weave in the region’s history with Scruggs’ personal history was likely the biggest community

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66 US Census Bureau.
support-building decision. While people in Shelby were less than enthusiastic at the beginning with using Don Gibson and Earl Scruggs as symbols of their community, incorporating the region’s history gave the projects a broader appeal and gave community members a vested interest in their ongoing success.

Fortunately DCC was not swayed by local disinclination to using Don Gibson and Earl Scruggs as tourism drivers. DCC was willing and able to take an accurate inventory of their artistic and cultural assets and realize that Scruggs—and Gibson to an extent, although the success of the Don Gibson Theatre is likely due mostly to its booking and operational strategies—was a strong enough brand to bring in heritage tourists. This was done with substantial help from outside entities, primarily the North Carolina Arts Council and independent consultants. The salient point, though, is that assets the community cast aside actually had the ability to draw significant tourist dollars to Shelby. There was an inaccurate understanding of the community’s existing resources, and clarifying that resulted in meaningful impacts.

Finally, DCC and others involved in the projects’ implementation focused on the potential economic benefits rather than quality of life arguments. Although quality of life improvements—the intangible cool factor that Whetten referred to—were something the group hoped would come from the projects, they also knew that prioritizing these arguments would get the group nowhere. For Shelby and Cleveland County, where a vast number of jobs had been shed in the past two decades, leaders and citizens were always going to be most concerned with how the projects might affect their wallets.

DCC recognized that the projects could never create jobs on the scale of the shuttered and relocated textile mills, but they also were aware that there was not likely to be any single entity
coming to town that would bring those jobs back. Shelby had to diversify, capitalize on any assets it had and look to the future in an effort to recreate its economic identity.
DOWNTOWN WILSON: THE VOLLIS SIMPSON WHIRLIGIG PARK

The Vollis Simpson Whirligig Park is slated to open officially in downtown Wilson, North Carolina in summer 2015. Unofficially, the Whirligig Park site has been accessible to the public for upwards of three years, with whirligigs on the site all that time. Simpson, a native and lifelong resident of Wilson County who passed away in June 2013 at age 94, became famous for his massive whirligig sculptures made from materials cast off by others which he typically salvaged from junkyards. After only making his first whirligig well into his sixties, Simpson became something of a poster child for what was termed the outsider art or visionary art movement. Some of his works sold for thousands of dollars, and in 2011 he was awarded the North Carolina Award, the state’s highest civilian honor. The Vollis Simpson Whirligig Park will feature thirty one restored Simpson whirligigs on a two acre site.

The Conditions: tobacco’s reign and decline

At one time widely recognized as home to the “World’s greatest tobacco market,” downtown Wilson, North Carolina saw by the mid-2000s it needed something different to draw people and stimulate

Figure 4: Wilson County Population

Source: US Census Bureau, Social Explorer Table SE:T1, Total Population

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68 http://www.nytimes.com/2013/06/06/arts/design/vollis-simpson-artist-dies-at-94.html?_r=0.
69 http://www.wilsontimes.com/News/Feature/Story/21595135---A-LEGEND-LOST.
70 http://www.wilsontimes.com/News/Feature/Story/33238911----LONG-AND-RICH-HISTORY-.
development.

In its heyday downtown Wilson had between a dozen and fifteen warehouses operating as tobacco auction centers. The annual auctions—first held in 1890—were one of the country’s largest connections between domestic tobacco growers and commercial production and distribution companies, filling downtown Wilson with activity for three to four months beginning in late summer. Local, state and even national politicians swamped the area, making stump speeches and pledging to support tobacco farmers and federal tobacco programs.

The auction system persisted into the 1970s, sustaining economic life in downtown Wilson throughout the rest of the calendar year. The seat of Wilson County, the city of Wilson sits just fifty miles east of Raleigh. During the peak era of tobacco production—the late 19th century through the first half of the 20th century—Wilson County had strong population growth (see Figure 4). Coincident with the decline in Wilson’s tobacco industry—a result of a combination of factors, including a shift away from the auction system to a process of direct sales, health warnings on tobacco use and a series of quotas imposed on tobacco farmers in the 1990s—population growth slowed in Wilson County. Likewise, the tobacco warehouses dotting downtown—each between about 60,000 to 80,000 square feet—became vacant or were torn down, to the point where just two remain standing today.71

These factors played a role in downtown Wilson’s deterioration starting mainly in the 1980s. The decline was exacerbated by shopping malls built outside of town which siphoned retail from downtown to the outlying areas.72 Growth in the city of Wilson lagged behind its neighbors—the city grew by 5.5% between 2000 and 2008, compared to 22.8% for comparable

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regional cities\textsuperscript{73}—hastening downtown’s stagnation and deterioration. By 2010 downtown had what was officially described as “a substantial amount of vacant building space.”\textsuperscript{74}

By the mid-2000s Wilson officials recognized that something had to be done to facilitate development downtown. Residents of Wilson echoed the sentiment. During this time about 2,000 residents participated in a visioning exercise dubbed Wilson 2020. One of the major results of the exercise was that residents said there needed to be a focus on downtown neighborhood revitalization. Using the results as a framework for a new strategic plan being written for the city, local authorities designated an improved downtown an official objective in the Wilson 2030 Comprehensive Plan.

\textit{Decision to Revitalize: an official focus on downtown}

The Wilson 2030 Comprehensive Plan set ambitious goals. Calling for retail, residential and mixed-use developments downtown, it envisioned downtown Wilson eventually becoming an “18-hour (day and night) destination for local residents and tourists.”\textsuperscript{75} More specific aims such as a vibrant pedestrian atmosphere, unique shops and restaurants were also called for, but these targets mainly stemmed from the initial step of piquing developer interest in doing mixed-use redevelopment projects downtown.

The impediment was that Wilson had few concrete ideas on how to entice developers to their downtown. Property was cheap, but with a population growing more slowly than its neighbors (particularly so among the population below fifty)\textsuperscript{76} downtown Wilson had little to differentiate itself from similarly sized neighbors, especially those with closer proximity to Raleigh. The comprehensive plan identified downtown as a key strategic area for Wilson’s future.

\textsuperscript{73} http://www.wilsonnc.org/userimages/image/MarketandEconomicDevelopmentAnalysis.pdf.
\textsuperscript{74} https://www.wilsonnc.org/userimages/image/Part%203%20Wilson%20Plan%20Final%20Adopted%2015-10-3-2.pdf.
\textsuperscript{75} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{76} http://www.wilsonnc.org/userimages/image/MarketandEconomicDevelopmentAnalysis.pdf.
health and growth, but the question, as Rodger Lentz, Wilson’s chief planning and development officer, put it, was “What do we do with an area that has no functioning real estate market, that is full of boarded up buildings?”\(^77\)

The solution they came up with was that they needed a project with catalytic potential, something beyond simply planning to redevelop one of the remaining tobacco warehouses or pursuing a new restaurant. These were goals, to be sure, but it was becoming clear that the means to that end would have to be something big, the spark which would allow further development to begin. Given downtown Wilson’s steady decline there was unlikely to be a queue of private investment just waiting to be spent in the area. As Kimberly Van Dyk, Wilson’s downtown development director, said, “Why would a developer bother doing mixed-use downtown? What made it stand out in a crowd? We needed something that would be a calling card, something Wilson could be known for. As opposed to just saying to a developer, ‘Hey, come do this mixed-use project here because we know we need it.’”\(^78\)

During the research phase for the comprehensive plan a design charrette was held with members of the community. A small group of citizens at that function brought up the fact that Vollis Simpson lived and worked in Lucama, a blip of a town about ten miles from downtown Wilson. Simpson had a panoply of whirligigs strewn about his farm in Lucama, and for years people would trek from all over to see the whirligigs in their native habitat; an estimated 25,000 people visited Simpson’s farm to see the whirligigs every year.\(^79\) Perhaps Simpson’s work could be incorporated into the revitalization of downtown, the group at the charrette thought.

To Van Dyk and other town officials, the idea seemed like Wilson’s best, most reasonable hope for a catalytic downtown project. Already looking for something to make

\(^{77}\) Lentz, R. (13, January 2015). Telephone interview.
\(^{78}\) Van Dyk, K. (23, December 2014). Telephone interview.
\(^{79}\) Ibid.
downtown stand out, Simpson’s whirligigs—familiar throughout Wilson and proximate to downtown—sounded like they might have the cache and pull to make downtown Wilson relevant again.

At the time, though, Simpson’s drawing power was not entirely clear to both officials and the citizen group in Wilson. Perhaps because Simpson was so well-known in the community and was a bit taken for granted, his status outside Wilson was not entirely clear to the people brewing up the idea of the Whirligig Park. The 25,000 annual visitor figure, which came from the North Carolina Department of Cultural Resources, was still unknown to the group. It was not until they dug deeper they realized they might have a valuable asset on their hands.

Simpson’s status in the art world had reached a crescendo since beginning a steady ascent in the early 1980s, transforming the man who was “wholly eastern North Carolina in his personality”80 into an “art star.”81 His fifty five foot tall “Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Happiness” is the centerpiece of the permanent collection at Baltimore’s American Visionary Art Museum. Other of his works are on permanent display at the North Carolina Museum of Art and the American Folk Art Museum in New York City. He had works commissioned for the 1996 summer Olympics in Atlanta. Bergdorf Goodman, the iconic Manhattan department store, displayed one of Simpson’s whirligigs in a window during the 2009 holiday season.82

Most of this was unbeknownst to the citizens and officials advocating for Simpson’s whirligigs to be the centerpiece of downtown Wilson’s resurgence. They only realized the true

81 http://www.nytimes.com/2013/06/06/arts/design/vollis-simpson-artist-dies-at-94.html?_r=0.
82 Ibid.
value of their asset once they started actively researching. As Henry Walston, a native and lifelong resident of Wilson who is the former chairman of the Wilson Downtown Development Corporation and would serve as chair of the Whirligig Park’s steering committee, put it, “We realized we’ve got a treasure here. We learned that if we did not do something, some oil sheikh or something like that was going to come in here and buy Simpson’s whole collection and move it away.”

This process is emblematic of the arts and cultural inventory a small city must go through to create an arts-based downtown revitalization strategy which might work. Wayne Martin,

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executive director of the North Carolina Arts Council, pointed out that a primary obstacle in successfully using arts and culture for revitalization is that small towns and rural areas simply do not have an accurate understanding of their existing arts and cultural assets. In some cases a town incorrectly believes it has an asset that can act as a powerful draw; in others, a community overlooks something that could actually be quite beneficial. For a locality with limited time and resources to devote to revitalization and economic development efforts, accurately identifying and correctly gauging the significance of existing assets is a necessary step.

**Bringing the Whirligig Park to Life: outside involvement**

By late 2009 Van Dyk and other officials had elected to pursue the Whirligig Park. With a vacant two-acre parcel owned by Wilson Downtown Properties, the nonprofit arm of the Wilson Downtown Development Corporation, in mind, Van Dyk and the citizen group set about raising funds for the process. An initial grant was provided by the North Carolina Arts Council to start a conservation program for the whirligigs. Soon after the project received the blessing of Simpson and his family, who agreed to have the thirty one whirligigs on his property transferred to the project’s possession.

By 2011 the project had received grants in the hundreds of thousands of dollars from the Kresge Foundation, ArtPlace and the National Endowment for the Arts’ Our Town program. Steering committee members and Van Dyk aimed for large funding and operational partners and worked their connections well enough to get experts from the Smithsonian Institution, Los Angeles County Museum of Art, the National Park Service and University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill to provide guidance on how to relocate and conserve the whirligigs.

Here again the accurate inventory of arts and culture assets was key. Researching Simpson led Van Dyk and the citizen group to discover how far afield his work was found. They
Image 6: Interior of Vollis Simpson Whirligig Park conservation headquarters

Photo credit: Adam Levin
realized that not only did large institutions all over the country have Simpson’s work, but he was held in high enough regard that those institutions were willing to pitch in on Wilson’s attempt to conserve a large portion of Simpson’s oeuvre.

What initially had been envisioned as a $4 million project ended up as a $7.2 million endeavor. Public skepticism about the project and reticence on spending tax dollars on the Whirligig Park resulted in a capital campaign financed entirely from grants and private donations. Approximately $4.2 million of the financing has been secured to date.\(^\text{84}\) Perhaps anticipating the public skepticism, three public meetings were led by the Whirligig Park’s steering committee in 2009 to give community members a chance to give their input on the Park’s design.

The process of relocating and conserving the whirligigs began in earnest in 2011. With over three years of work completed to date, twenty seven of the thirty one whirligigs have been restored. Ten are already on the Whirligig Park site while four remain on Simpson farm. The rest are being stored or finished in the project’s conservation headquarters in a former auto parts shop in downtown Wilson owned by a steering committee member.\(^\text{85}\) While the Whirligig Park is still about $3 million short of its capital goal, its impacts in downtown Wilson have already begun to be seen.

**Impacts: Wilson after whirligigs**

Despite not being fully open—the outstanding $3 million of fundraising capital is the final hurdle, expected to be cleared by the close of 2015\(^\text{86}\)—the Vollis Simpson Whirligig Park has begun spawning the benefits its planners and benefactors envisioned. Based on the Wilson 2030 Comprehensive Plan, mixed-use developments with the goal of increasing residential

\(^{84}\) Van Dyk, K. (23, December 2014). Telephone interview.
\(^{85}\) Walston, H. (21, January 2015). Personal interview.
capacity and occupancy in the area were the metrics on which downtown Wilson’s revitalization hinged the most. This also is one of ArtPlace’s vibrancy indicators. Using the other applicable ArtPlace vibrancy indicators established earlier—indicator businesses and independent businesses—the Whirligig Park’s efficacy can be evaluated in part by its role in promulgating development of these types in downtown Wilson. Tourist visits will also be commented on, although without the Whirligig Park being fully open it is difficult to draw conclusions on that aspect.

As seen in Figure 5, approximately $20 million in new investment has flowed into downtown Wilson since the Whirligig Park was announced in 2009. Of that, $15 million is

Figure 5: Downtown Wilson Investment, 2009-2013

in mixed-used development. Nash Street Lofts, downtown Wilson’s first ever mixed-use development, opened a few blocks from the Whirligig Park site in early 2014. The $2 million dollar project—$1.5 million of residential and $500,000 of ground-floor retail—redeveloped and reoccupied a space that had sat vacant for thirty years on downtown Wilson’s Nash Street. The project’s thirteen market-rate units, ranging between 500 and 1,200 square feet, are fully leased. The developer of the project singled out the Whirligig Park as a factor in their decision to pursue the space.

“‘We are really excited,’ Wilkerson [the developer] said. ‘With the arts factor and the Whirligig Park and the arts-driven economy of sorts, we found [Wilson] more and more attractive.’”

Other developments brought more mixed-use and new types of retail into downtown Wilson. Wilson Furniture Company Lots, a five-unit development, was done by the same group behind Nash Street Lofts and opened in July 2014. The 64,000 square foot Hi Dollar Warehouse, one of the two remaining tobacco warehouses and located directly across from the Whirligig Park, is in the early stages of a private redevelopment. The structure was singled out in the Wilson 2030 Comprehensive Plan as being ripe for redevelopment. Overall, combined public and private investment in downtown Wilson has increased from just under $1 million in the 2009-2010 fiscal year to approximately $5.5 million in 2013-2014, the most recent fiscal year. Van Dyk credits the Whirligig Park with being the spark responsible for nearly all the increased investment.

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Image 7: Vollis Simpson Whirligig Park

Photo credit: Adam Levin
Five indicator businesses have opened in downtown Wilson since the Whirligig Park was announced. They include three restaurants, a craft beer store which opened in 2013 and a general goods store. Of those, four are independent businesses. Four of them also are part of the previously mentioned mixed-use developments. While the percentage of independent businesses is high, overall openings of indicator businesses are not as strong as the numbers on mixed-use developments. This is especially true when considering only $2 million of the total $20 million invested in downtown Wilson since the Whirligig Park was announced has been in standalone indicator businesses (Figure 5). This also negatively impacts the mixed-use metric, as it encompasses not just specific mixed-use developments, but also the overall mix between retail and residential offerings in an area. On the positive side, the craft beer store is the first of its kind in downtown Wilson. A microbrewery is also currently in the works, which would be downtown Wilson’s first.

But while the Whirligig Park has succeeded in drawing some mixed-use development and investment to downtown Wilson, further goals espoused as benefits to the Whirligig Park—primarily tourism and business recruitment—cannot be assessed at this time. According to Van Dyk, the North Carolina Department of Cultural Resources estimated the Whirligig Park could draw up to 100,000 visitors annually. The evaluation of these metrics is important, and should be carefully monitored in the period after the park fully opens to the public.

An interesting aspect of Wilson’s business recruitment strategy is how it seeks to marry the concept of the Whirligig Park with Greenlight, the city-owned fiber optic network. The network—completed in 2008 as a modern-day outgrowth of the era when power companies refused to provide their services to small towns in eastern North Carolina, forcing them to build

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their own power networks—gives Wilson some the fastest internet speeds in the state.\footnote{http://www.indyweek.com/indyweek/wilson-had-fiber-while-the-rest-of-nc-was-waiting-for-its-page-to-load/Content?oid=4331118.} Wilson officials are hoping to pair fast internet speeds with the vibe of a funky, artistic small town to attract high tech businesses.\footnote{Lentz, R. (13, January 2015). Telephone interview.} They hope the Whirligig Park will play a significant role in the process, resulting in another metric which should be monitored going forward.

A qualitative assessment of downtown Wilson and the Whirligig Park’s impacts based on a site visit suggest the project has not yet reached its full revitalization impact. On a recent Wednesday afternoon the streets in downtown Wilson were fairly quiet. There was no visible construction happening, and a significant number of storefronts appeared vacant. The Whirligig Park can be visited—and ten whirligigs are there, ready to be observed—but on two separate checks no one else was in the area. A check of one of the restaurants opened since the Whirligig Park’s implementation saw that it was mostly empty at lunchtime. By contrast, the restaurant where I ate lunch—a longstanding barbeque restaurant about five miles from downtown—was quite crowded.

Downtown Wilson’s quiet state may of course be attributable to it being the middle of the day on a workday and to the Whirligig Park not being fully open yet, but the overall atmosphere of downtown was subdued. This was in contrast with Shelby, where a Friday afternoon saw plenty of people on the street and more local businesses open offering goods like coffee and beer.

Returning to Table 3, the Whirligig Park lags behind the other projects in its internet metrics. This may partially be attributable to the Whirligig Park not having officially opened and the press coverage than can be attendant with such an event, but that seems unlikely to explain the entire disparity. The Whirligig Park only has 8% fewer Facebook likes than the well-
established Newberry Opera House. The key difference is that the Whirligig Park has not posted
on Twitter, a medium where the other projects have active accounts. The service is a key tool for
self-promotion; if the Whirligig Park is looking to attract heritage tourist dollars it would
probably be wise to extend its reach with the platform.

Lessons: local artist as growth machine?

Several factors have facilitated the development of the Vollis Simpson Whirligig Park to
this point. Examining them in finer detail reveals lessons that can be extracted and applied to
towns in similar positions to Wilson.

The first step was that Wilson had to go through the process of identifying its unique
assets. Like Shelby, Wilson officials first thought about something that seemed distinctive, but in
fact is claimed by towns throughout North Carolina: barbecue. With no “natural beauty”94 to
bolster its attempts at downtown revitalization, Wilson officials gravitated to the first heritage
asset that came to mind. They soon realized that barbecue had neither the catalytic aspect they
sought nor the ability to draw people downtown. To populate downtown mixed-use
developments Wilson officials theorized they needed to build around something singular to their
community, an authentic representation of what Wilson was about. Embracing Simpson’s
whirligigs not only provided downtown Wilson with the unique asset officials sought, but also
built community buy-in by developing around a cherished commodity.

“If the whirligigs had been built in, say, Wilmington, there would have been no interest in
the community and no traction. The people in the community who embraced the project at first
were the ones who went and parked their car near [Simpson’s] place and shined their headlights
to see the whirligigs twirl. It had to be something authentic or it would never work,” said Lentz.

Of course, Wilson also had to correctly judge the capability of the whirligigs as a tool to draw investment downtown. As discussed earlier, much of the community were so used to the whirligigs they had an inaccurate understanding of their outside appeal. They had perhaps overlooked a powerful asset for quite some time, a misstep that often prevents small towns from using arts and culture for downtown revitalization and economic development. The need to be self-aware and know the community is especially vital in implementing these strategies.

Having a committed group of citizens dedicated to the Whirligig Park creation also was imperative to its development. It allowed the project a measure of protection from skeptical community members. Although no tax dollars have gone into the project, a vocal group of citizens became concerned public funds were being spent on it and objected, while others simply felt the project was an unwise use of space and was destined to fail.95

These perceptions were countered by the fact that the project’s citizen-led committees—made up of roughly 100 people—were populated mostly by longtime Wilson residents with deep roots in the community. By serving as a sort of vanguard for this new, unproven downtown revitalization strategy, the Whirligig Park was somewhat shielded from criticisms that the project was an overly experimental lark driven by officials who knew the town less well than its residents. In small towns with no history of arts and culture-based revitalization projects, critiques such as these are likely to be common. Having a group which is deeply embedded in the community supporting the project can be central to keeping the project from being derailed.

Another benefit of having a citizen-led aspect to the Whirligig Park’s development is that it opened fundraising doors which would have been closed to town officials. Since the project has relied so heavily on private donations, both individual and corporate, this proved to be paramount.

“[Having people with deep roots involved] is especially important because we are trying to raise the money. I don’t think Rodger going door to door saying, ‘You need to support this project’ would have worked. I have no pull with a lot of the people we’ve raised funds from,” said Lentz.

As a result town officials leaned heavily on Walston and other citizen committee members to appeal for funds and other support. The citizens got local businesses to donate not only money but materials such as scrap metal and parts which were integral to completing the whirligigs’ conservation. Citizens also became the dominant factor behind large corporate donations from companies with a presence in Wilson, including BB&T and Bridgestone.

The involved citizens helped with another aspect in the Whirligig Park’s development, the involvement of large outside partners. The Kresge Foundation, ArtPlace and the National Endowment for the Arts all chipped in with substantial grant funding. The Smithsonian Institution, Los Angeles County Museum of Art, the National Park Service, the North Carolina Departments of Commerce and Transportation all contributed expertise or other support. According to Van Dyk, each of these organizations asked about levels of community involvement as part of their evaluation process for becoming involved. But once their requirements were met—and, according to Van Dyk, the requirements were not overly burdensome—each organization was enthusiastic about helping the Whirligig Park. For Wilson and other small towns with limited funds and resources to devote to downtown revitalization obtaining outside support can extend capabilities beyond what they might be able to accomplish on their own.

Finally, Wilson had to overcome notable political opposition to the Whirligig Park. Elected town and county figures, perhaps sensing some of the community opposition present,
expressed reservations about the project throughout its initial phases. This skepticism did result in the project not using any public funds, but it also forced officials in Wilson to talk about the project not in terms of arts and culture, but in messages and concepts that elected officials are accustomed to. This primarily meant playing down the talk of creative placemaking and playing up the focus on new investment in downtown.  

This lesson is likely to ring true in quite a few small towns. In places with no precedent for arts and culture projects and where more conservative views about public spending on economic development are more pervasive, elected officials and locals may be more inclined to stick with the tried and true. By being prepared to face these mindsets and by keeping the focus on tangible, traditional outcomes such as new investment, increased business starts and more downtown foot traffic, arts and culture-based revitalization and economic development strategies can find a foothold and be successful in small towns.

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NEWBERRY, SOUTH CAROLINA: THE NEWBERRY OPERA HOUSE

The renovated Newberry Opera House opened in 1998. The 1881 French Gothic structure occupies the center of Newbery, South Carolina’s downtown square. Newbery, a former textile town, turned to its dilapidated and underused architectural centerpiece to revitalize its downtown and counter the deleterious effects of the cotton industry’s decline. A small cadre of citizens worked assiduously to resurrect the Opera House, which has since been lauded as Newberry’s savior. The Opera House in part provided the inspiration for the Don Gibson Theatre in Shelby and in 2008 received the Outstanding Historic Theatre Award from the League of Historic American Theatres.

Conditions in Newberry: a familiar refrain of vanishing industry

“We weren’t dead, but we were on the gurney.”

Cotton was king in Newberry for a long time. The seat of Newberry County, the city was home to four cotton mills beginning in the late 19th century and spanning most of the 20th century. Newberry is a small city located between two larger ones. Columbia, home to the University of South Carolina, is about forty one miles to the southeast. Greenville, the largest city in Upstate South Carolina, sits about sixty six miles to Newberry’s northwest. The cotton mills provided Newberry with steady income and allowed it to flourish despite its location in the shadows of larger neighbors.

Newberry’s population grew during the period of peak cotton production, 1880 through 1940. Table 4 on the following page presents data on population and population growth for the city of Newberry. Driven by workers at the cotton mills and their families, Newberry’s

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population rose sharply in this period. The postwar period has seen Newberry’s population growth slow compared with the heyday of cotton production.

The cotton mills in Newberry were among the most prominent in the state. Newberry Cotton Mills opened in 1883 and was South Carolina’s largest cotton production facility at the time.99 Oakland Mill operated in Newberry for ninety seven years after its establishment in 1912.

Table 4: City of Newberry Population Changes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Population</th>
<th>Percent change from previous period</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1880</td>
<td>2,343</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1890</td>
<td>3,020</td>
<td>28.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1900</td>
<td>4,607</td>
<td>52.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1910</td>
<td>5,028</td>
<td>9.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1920</td>
<td>5,894</td>
<td>17.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1930</td>
<td>7,298</td>
<td>23.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1940</td>
<td>7,510</td>
<td>2.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1950</td>
<td>7,546</td>
<td>0.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1960</td>
<td>8,208</td>
<td>8.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1970</td>
<td>9,218</td>
<td>12.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1980</td>
<td>9,866</td>
<td>7.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1990</td>
<td>10,542</td>
<td>6.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2000</td>
<td>10,580</td>
<td>0.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2010</td>
<td>10,277</td>
<td>-2.9%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: US Census Bureau, Social Explorer Table SE:T1, Total Population

It had its own village in Newberry to house its workers and their families.100

By the mid-1970s, however, many of the same forces that shrunk the cotton industry in Shelby had also impacted Newberry. The cotton mills were sold, downsized and eventually shuttered. By the end of the 1980s none remained.101 In addition to slowing population growth, retail in Newberry—particularly in the ten-block downtown—began closing or moving to suburban locales. By 1991, there were twenty two vacant stores on Main Street alone in

downtown Newberry—a distance of only four blocks.\textsuperscript{102} Downtown had few residents and the real estate market there was nonexistent.\textsuperscript{103} In 1994 the last two department stores in downtown closed, a blow many residents considered downtown’s death knell.\textsuperscript{104} Further retarding downtown’s ability to generate economic activity was the fact that the city of Newberry did not then, and still does not now, employ an economic development staff person.

\textit{An Arts and Asset-Based Revitalization: turning to the Opera House}

The last downtown remnant of Newberry’s healthier past was the Opera House. Built for $30,000\textsuperscript{105} in 1881, the structure sits in the middle of downtown Newberry. In its first reincarnation it served mainly as a movie theater, but as Newberry’s economic fortunes declined it had less and less business. It closed as a movie theater in 1952 and became vacant shortly after. The city of Newberry purchased the Opera House in 1975 amid calls for it to be torn down. The

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{Figure6.png}
\caption{City of Newberry Population}
\label{fig:city_population}
\end{figure}

\textsuperscript{103} Wiseman, J. (9, February 2015). Telephone interview.
\textsuperscript{105} http://www.newberryoperahouse.com/briefhistory.htm.
city left the Opera House standing and moved its offices into the ground floor. The Opera House remained in this state for two decades.

By 1995 James Wiseman had seen enough. Wiseman is a lifelong Newberry resident who was nearing the end of his career practicing dentistry at the time. His family has lived in Newberry for several generations, and his social capital would prove crucial to redeveloping the Opera House. Wiseman felt that the Opera House was the only viable asset left in Newberry that downtown might be able to build around. He wanted to restore the Opera House as a performing arts center and draw visitors from outside Newberry.

To get the Opera House out of city control and potentially set up funding for the redevelopment Wiseman ran for an open city council slot. After winning the seat he brokered the sale of a local bank building and convinced the city to transfer its offices there, freeing up the Opera House in 1996.106

Wiseman then set up a foundation of fifteen people he knew from Newberry and the region. The group included lawyers, doctors and other established, older professionals with networks. The group eventually became the Opera House’s board of directors. Wiseman also sent a letter to another fifteen acquaintances asking for seed money. From that letter he was able to raise $100,000, which he used to hire consultants to assess the Opera House’s condition. The money also eventually went towards paying the salary of Debra Smith, who came to the project from Middlebury College’s theater in Vermont.

The fundraising process for redeveloping the Opera House required nearly three years, costing close to $8 million in the end. About sixty percent of the funding came through private sources, including large foundations and corporations such as Duke Power, South Carolina

Electric and Gas and Wachovia Bank. The project was able to tap into these major providers of capital largely as a result of Wiseman’s reputation and well-connectedness. Without his and other board members’ deep roots in the region these doors would not have been open. With little research into the project’s financial feasibility, the corporate lenders had little to rely on but board members’ reputation and connections. Ultimately these proved leverage enough.

Public sources of funds came from state and local grants and, crucially, a tax increment financing district which was set up in downtown Newberry. The technique allows a municipality to use money from anticipated future revenues in a designated zone. This gained importance as it became apparent that private money alone would cover the project. It also gave the city skin in the game, a reason for the town and its residents to care about the project’s outcome.

Along the way Wiseman and the board concluded that controlling the Opera House alone was not the most efficient way to revitalize Newberry’s downtown. Many property owners with real estate close to the Opera House had been trying to sell their assets for years. Wiseman and the board took advantage of their 501(c) (3) nonprofit status to redevelop those properties as well. The board pledged to give property owners a tax write off (something the board could do as a nonprofit) in exchange for selling the properties to the board for a nominal fee. Nearly all the property owners agreed, giving the board control of much of the real estate in downtown.

Wiseman then turned to local contractors and proposed selling them the property if they promised to act as developers and put in new, upgraded retail and residential space. The deals were struck about the same time as the Opera House’s 1998 reopening.107

**Impacts: downtown Newberry after revitalization**

The Opera House’s success using the adapted ArtPlace metrics (indicator businesses opened, percent of independent businesses and mixed-use) and tourists visited and tourism

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revenues will first be evaluated. Residual impacts and impacts not fitting into those categories will also be given a brief discussion.

Table 5 presents a synopsis of indicator businesses extant in Newberry in 2013 and in 1997, the year before the Newberry Opera House opened. It includes apartment units as well. Significant increases are seen in each category.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of development</th>
<th>Number in 1997</th>
<th>Number in 2009</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Apartments</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Restaurants and bars</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hotels</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1 (77 rooms)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Galleries</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Antique stores</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Miley 2009

Newberry also has been successful in the percentage new businesses which are independent. The only category in Table 5 which would not be considered independent is the hotel, a Hampton Inn. This likely would not be seen as a great failure.

Results of the mixed-use development metric should also be considered successful. The twenty nine apartment units in Table 5 include only new apartments and not the units rehabilitated by developers in the properties which had been owned by the Opera House board. Including those units would result in around forty additional apartment units in downtown. The downtown hotel rooms should also be included in the category as they add pedestrians to the downtown mix.
Newberry Opera House, Newberry, South Carolina

Photo credit: Google Images
The Opera House hosts about 200 events annually. Within an hour’s drive of Newberry there are approximately 1.8 million people.\textsuperscript{108} Newberry County was home to only 37,521 people in 2013.\textsuperscript{109} As a result, the Opera House’s strategy from its genesis was to draw primarily a non-local crowd (defined as being from outside Newberry County).

Opera House attendance has grown steadily. In 2013, the most recent year for which data is available, 122,000 people took in a performance at the Opera House.\textsuperscript{110} About 75\% of visitors were non-local in each of the last three years in which data was available.\textsuperscript{111} That is a bit lower than the goal of 80\% which Wiseman and Smith cited to me. Table 6 summarizes visitors and expenditures at the Opera House.

\textit{Table 6: Newberry Opera House Visitors and Expenditures}

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Total visitors</th>
<th>Non-local visitors</th>
<th>Total expenditures</th>
<th>Expenditures by non-locals</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2011</td>
<td>97,000</td>
<td>70,998</td>
<td>$18,032,452</td>
<td>$13,198,639</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2012</td>
<td>103,000</td>
<td>78,443</td>
<td>$19,147,861</td>
<td>$14,582,676</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2013</td>
<td>122,000</td>
<td>90,507</td>
<td>$22,679,991</td>
<td>$16,825,393</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Miley 2009

The Opera House’s internet metrics (Table 3) are less important than for the other case study subjects. With a mature audience stream and established regional presence, the Opera House is less reliant on new publicity. Having said that, its numbers in the internet metrics are strong on Twitter, but have room for improvement in other categories.

\textit{Applicable Takeaways: replicating the Opera House revitalization process}

Downtown Newberry’s revitalization around the Opera House provides insights for similarly positioned towns. The lessons reiterate some of those gleaned from Shelby and Wilson’s experiences but also reflect some subtle differences.

\textsuperscript{108} US Census Bureau.
\textsuperscript{109} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{110} Miley 2009.
\textsuperscript{111} Ibid.
The most influential factor in downtown Newberry’s revitalization was the presence of one well-connected individual willing to put his network to use. Wiseman’s connections kept the project afloat financially, particularly in the early going. He enabled access to the project’s necessary capital and got the project on the radars of influential people. For example, his former college roommate was the Secretary of South Carolina’s Department of Commerce; the department eventually gave the project grant funding.

Along with Wiseman, the board was populated with similarly well-connected people. Wiseman and the board members’ collective social capital was the project’s driving force in the planning and fundraising stages. This allowed Newberry to get away without having much research done before starting the project. Unlike Shelby, which commissioned feasibility studies and site visits, Newberry lacked research or models. Social capital helped plug those gaps.

For a small town such as Newberry, with no economic development staff members or major industries, the impetus for downtown redevelopment may have to come from a non-traditional source. Small town revitalization projects generally require several outside partners; thus, accessing those partners and convincing them to contribute is an essential step, one best accomplished by deploying social capital.

This serves more as a precaution than a recommendation. Imagine a town similar to Newberry—a small former textile town with a dwindling downtown and few prospects for economic development. Not an uncommon scenario throughout the south, the Rust Belt and other parts of the country. If there are usable assets, and if those assets are exploited in a smart way, downtown revitalization and economic development is possible. Taken as a whole with Shelby and Wilson, the Newberry example implies such a process needs a dedicated, well-connected citizen champion.
However, this is not to suggest that the presence of such figures ensures a successful downtown revitalization program. Rather, it is a necessary but not sufficient aspect of such a program.

Newberry also shows how a small town can take advantage of a decaying downtown and the benefits that incorporation as a nonprofit can bestow. To implement a comprehensive downtown revitalization plan rather than a piecemeal project the Opera House board gained control of most of the real estate around the Opera House. Since downtown Newberry was in a state of blight, property owners who had been trying to sell their vacant property had no prospective buyers. The board took advantage of the demand vacuum by taking distressed assets off private owners’ books in exchange for next to nothing. Had downtown Newberry been in a strong position, this would not have been so easily done.

By enticing contractors cum developers to take possession of this real estate in exchange for tax credits, the board demonstrated how their nonprofit status can facilitate downtown revitalization. The whole of the process required little capital. It transpired due to the combination of a depressed downtown and nonprofit status. This fairly uncomplicated model, undertaken by private citizens with a modicum, but by no means extensive, knowledge of real estate and nonprofit law, is one other small towns likely could mimic successfully.

Finally, Newberry’s experience reiterates the importance of looking inward to a town’s existing assets and understanding there is no exact model for success. Debra Smith related that representatives from small towns often visit Newberry to see the Opera House and brainstorm strategies for revitalizing their own downtowns. The message they come away with is that they have to do a deep dive into their community and come out with an understanding of what is authentic and unique about it.
Sometimes this process is not difficult—in Newberry’s case, for example, the Opera House was clearly an asset. In Wilson’s case, the town had to determine that Simpson might have the stature to provide a revitalization tool. And for Shelby, the combination of accepting formerly relegated native sons as assets and recognizing that its architecture and built environment could be conduits for downtown vibrancy allowed it to position itself for future success. The common theme is that of tapping into a small town’s authenticity. It may not salvage a small town downtown on its own—any project must be managed and operated well—and it may not turn up valuable assets in every community. But in certain cases, it may be a wise place to start.
CONCLUSIONS AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

This section summarizes findings from the three case studies and points to areas where more research may be beneficial. It begins with a recap of the most salient points made throughout the paper, continues with implications based on observed metrics which have not yet been pointed out and finishes with comments on where more research is needed.

Results on Metrics

What benefits may accrue a small town which identifies and uses a unique asset for downtown revitalization and economic development? Analyzing the metrics from Shelby, Wilson and Newberry provides insights into that question.

The Don Gibson Theatre and Earl Scruggs Center were developed as revitalization tools for Uptown Shelby. Based on the number of indicator businesses opened in Shelby since 2009 (when the Don Gibson Theatre opened), there is a benefit to having a well-managed arts and cultural project in a fairly compact downtown. Several businesses, including a coffee shop, craft beer store and restaurants have opened or expanded. Restaurants report a significant increase in receipts on nights with a performance at the Don Gibson Theatre. Based on personal conversations with owners of the indicator businesses near the two projects, they feel lucky to have nearby real estate. The indicator businesses all had customers on the day of my visit.

Shelby’s experience also suggests arts and culture revitalization projects in small towns may be valid tools for cultivating independent businesses, at least in the initial phases of the arts and culture project. All the new indicator businesses in Uptown to date have been independent. This is perhaps because local business owners are privy to local developments first and thus may be liable to snatch potentially valuable real estate before larger, out-of-town companies. It may also be due to the particular nature of small town downtowns as being more suited for and
hospitable to independent businesses. Whatever the case, Shelby indicates independent businesses may be especially benefitted by an art and culture project.

Developments in Uptown Shelby also suggest that, on its own, a theater may not be enough to create demand for downtown living. Since the Don Gibson Theatre opened in 2009 the number of people living in Uptown has stayed fairly constant. Despite a recent emphasis from Shelby officials on drawing more people to live Uptown, there are no residential projects on the horizon. So although the Don Gibson Theatre may be successful at drawing visitors from out of the region to shows, it may not have the power to cause people to move. It is too early to draw any conclusions on this subject about the Earl Scruggs Center, which has only been open since January 2014.

Qualitatively, the arts and culture-based revitalization efforts in Uptown do suggest that the nature of a small town downtown can be positively impacted by such projects. Uptown was fairly busy on a site visit. Interviewees were unanimous that activity in Uptown has picked up in the last five or so years, and that peoples’ opinions of the area are becoming more positive. It is difficult to assign how much of the change is due to the arts and culture projects, but as they are the major projects Uptown in recent years, they would seem to bear at least some responsibility.

Wilson’s Vollis Simpson Whirligig Park can also be judged on its downtown revitalization and economic development capabilities. The metrics from downtown Wilson suggest an arts and culture project in a small town can spur modest amounts of downtown residential development and developer interest. Mixed-use development can also result. Perhaps the arts and culture project can best be interpreted as being a message or sign from a town to developers or investors that the town is at least interested in revitalization and in trying a new approach. This on its own may be enough to spark developer interest. Since this differs from
Shelby’s case—where developers have not shown the same interest—this is an area where more research is perhaps warranted.

Wilson’s case shows that indicator businesses not part of a mixed-use development may open as a result of developer interest but will open more slowly than developer activity, at least until the arts and culture project is fully operational. Indicator businesses then may be seen as following signals from developers. Perhaps this is an indication that tourism prospects for the Whirligig Park are not perceived to be as strong as prospects for people moving to Wilson. Wilson’s case does reaffirm that arts and culture downtown projects in small towns can be associated with independent indicator businesses opening.

Adopting a qualitative perspective to look at the Whirligig Park suggests an arts and culture revitalization project in a small town may not be enough to change a downtown’s character, at least in the early going. Wilson’s downtown is significantly less vibrant than Shelby’s. This could be due to the Whirligig Park not being fully open, but for a downtown where significant new investment has occurred in recent years, there was not much feeling of activity. Restaurants were mostly empty, the streets did not show heavy pedestrian usage and no other visitors were at the Whirligig Park. This lack of excited could be related to the Whirligig Park’s relatively minor online presence.

One question not explored in this paper is how the variations in sizes of downtowns may change the impacts of arts and culture based revitalization projects. Wilson’s downtown footprint is approximately double that of Uptown. An examination of how downtown size can have repercussions for the impacts of downtown revitalization projects would be valuable.

The Newberry Opera House has been operational the longest of the projects in this paper and thus provides good perspective. Newberry’s experience and metrics show that a well-run
theater in a small town downtown with good access to a fairly large pool of people can lead to a significant number of indicator businesses opening. It also reaffirms that a high percentage of those indicator businesses will be independent.

The amount of new residential units combined with indicator business openings in downtown Newberry shows arts and culture revitalization projects in small towns can create mixed-use development and residential demand. This affirms the finding in Wilson but contradicts what has happened in Shelby. The lesson from Newberry perhaps is that residential demand may have to be artificially created to some degree. The Opera House board used its nonprofit status to gain control of vacant downtown properties and then transfer control in exchange for tax write offs to contractors who assumed the role of developers. In this case, letting the market act on its own resulted in a lack of demand for downtown residential properties. Newberry created downtown residential demand and supply by creating an incentive for developers to build new units and putting in place a new tourist attraction.

Another question for further research revolves around the percentage of independent businesses associated with small town arts and culture revitalization projects. The projects in this paper resulted in high proportions of new independent indicator businesses. As noted above, this may be due to local knowledge of the real estate market enabling local business people to purchase property ahead of non-independent businesses. The question then becomes, assuming a small town arts and culture downtown revitalization project is operational for several years, how long can the percentage of independent indicator businesses in the area stay high? Presumably this situation would lead to increasing real estate values, potentially giving an advantage to non-independent companies which could afford to pay higher rents. Newberry’s experience suggests
independent indicator businesses may be able to hang on for quite some time, but further research into this subject is needed.

**Other Observations**

This paper finds the best arts and culture-based economic development or revitalization projects in small towns are presented as authentic community representations. This means they take as their foundation something from a community—be it a person, a collection, a legacy or a building. This is done in contrast to creating something which did not previously exist and has no particular connection to a place.

Small town arts and culture-based economic development and revitalization projects improve their odds of success by being “authentic” and basing their concept around some facet of their community. Heritage tourists assess a project by its authenticity, and that authenticity is something they cherish. Tapping into an existing asset in a community gives people a reason to care about the project and a source of pride, things evident to outsiders. Building a random monument to someone with only tangential connection to a given community will be a less effective technique than repurposing an existing structure to honor someone with broad outside appeal but deep community roots.

Accomplishing such a project therefore requires knowing what a community’s assets are. Appropriating the iconography of a famous person or culture from somewhere else is not as strong a strategy—a community has to know what makes it unique. Knowing that, and knowing if that unique factor is enough to bring in outsiders, is perhaps the most important part of developing an arts and culture-based revitalization 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 there may be a chance of revitalization by building around it.

Each case study presents a project generated by community members. This helped gain traction and aided in countering skepticism. Rather than a proscribed, top-down approach to revitalization, the bottom-up approach enabled more organic projects that increased community buy-in and made community members attached to the projects’ success by giving them skin in the game. 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 professional with fewer community ties.

Related to this finding, 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 all were able to tap into funding and support sources which otherwise would not have been available to professionals. This was partially because it signaled that the project was something the community was behind and would not be an effort which would be abandoned without seeing results. 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 adventurous arts and culture-based project.
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