



# THE PLAIN DEALER

## ARTS AND THE ECONOMY

### Artists play key role in urban development

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Artists see themselves as devoted to creativity. City planners now look at artists and see something else: a highly valuable form of urban fertilizer.

Sprinkle some galleries on a dying main street. Change the zoning to allow live-work loft space. Throw in some government money for facade renovation or mortgage assistance.

Voila: Property values will jump, and you'll soon worry about how to avoid gentrification, which is what happens when people with money move into a former zone of blight.

This scenario, more or less, was the leitmotif of an all-day conference held at Cleveland State University on Wednesday, titled "From Rust Belt to Artist Belt."

Organized by the nonprofit Community Partnership for Arts and Culture, the event was intended to raise awareness about one of the latest trends in urban development - the rise of cultural districts in struggling city neighborhoods.

Nineteen speakers described how cities from Pittsburgh to Paducah, Ky., have lured artists, galleries and cultural organizations to areas formerly written off by developers and city governments.

Keynote speaker Jeremy Nowak, president of the Philadelphia-based Reinvestment Fund, a nonprofit organization devoted to community revitalization, said artists are naturally gifted at what he called "place-making."

"Artists and creative people are adept at uncovering and expressing and repurposing the assets of place," he said. "In the great halls of philanthropy, we try to force these things."

Cleveland is a "thought leader" in the new movement, said Esther Robinson, founder of Art- Home, a New York-based organization that helps artists attain financial literacy and homeownership.

This week alone, advocates of the arts in Cleveland announced progress on major projects to create a theater and entertainment district at Gordon Square in the Detroit-Shoreway neighborhood, and to create a District of Design along lower Euclid Avenue.

Linda Warren, president of Village Capital Corp. in Cleveland, said that 11 of 36 neighborhoods in the city are doing something to promote themselves as an art-friendly place.

Attended by 180 artists, developers, foundation officers, community activists and city planners, the conference examined programs and services that help artistic urban pioneers locally and nationwide.

Paducah spent \$2.8 million to recruit artists to live in the formerly blighted Lower Town neighborhood, a 30-block area of crumbling Victorian mansions near the city's downtown.

The investment generated \$35 million in private economic impact and turned Lower Town into a regional attraction that garnered national media attention.

Conferees also sounded cautionary notes. Cleveland City Planning Director Robert Brown said the city hasn't figured out yet how to reconcile building codes with a new live-work zone east of the city's downtown.

The zoning allows artists to live and work in former industrial spaces, but the state building code still requires upgrades that can push the cost of loft living too high for artists.

Mark Barone, the artist and planner who led the revival in Paducah, lamented that sometimes, poor residents get pushed out as a consequence of the influx of wealth.

"Did we displace people? Yeah, I'm not going to lie to you," Barone said. "Anyone who tells you they don't is lying."

Lillian Kuri, director of special projects at the Cleveland Foundation, said the answer is to plan cultural districts in ways that allow artists and prior residents to acquire equity so they, too, can benefit when property values rise.

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