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Ask Not What Artists Can Do For You

Supply And Demand As Cpac Goes "from Rust Belt To Artist Belt"

By Michael Gill

During the Community Partnership for the Arts and Culture's "From Rust Belt to Artist Belt" conference last week, the atrium at Cleveland State University's Maxine Goodman Levin College of Urban Affairs was filled with about 200 people. By a casual show of hands, much of the crowd had come from outside the Cleveland area. When the next show of hands came, it was clear that nearly half the room had come from out of state.

Those numbers say a lot. But maybe the bigger lesson is that people from all those places - cities in Pennsylvania, Michigan, New York and all around the Rust Belt - are hoping that artists can be the medicine for their post-industrial hangover. All those places have vacant houses and industrial spaces in copious supply. And some of them, in a neighborhood or two, have seen artists clean up, animate and improve things to sufficient degree that they hope attracting more can help even more neighborhoods. Anytime a lot of states facing the same problems look to the same solution simultaneously, it's worth asking if there's enough supply to meet all that demand: in this case, enough artists and customers to make it all work. Or, spread thinly, their synergy diluted, might we see more of these efforts fail than necessary?

The question is worth asking even within local economies. The same day as the CPAC conference, the Gordon Square Arts District and the Detroit Shoreway CDC broke ground on the renovation of the Capitol Theatre, which will be an anchor in that burgeoning locale. If institutional momentum can measure success, Detroit Shoreway's arts appeal is looking quite strong, especially for consumers. When it opens to show independent and foreign films, the renovated Capitol will join the neighborhood's established Cleveland Public Theater, art galleries, a coffee shop and soon a new facility for the Near West community theater. That's a lot of shows.

But in the meantime, Cleveland's North Collinwood neighborhood is also pushing its arts identity. So is the St. Clair-Superior neighborhood, whose resident organizations have begun to describe it as the Art Quarter. And then there are Little Italy and Tremont, with their established art walks and plentiful galleries. Of course, none of these is that regional epicenter of high art, the neighborhood known as University Circle - even if that place, too, is surrounded by a mix of redeveloped and run-down or abandoned property.

Brian Friedman, executive director of Northeast Shores CDC, didn't mean to say there aren't enough artists to go around, but that was the subtext as he told of an artist who moved out of Tremont and into the Waterloo district, which had become fodder for a slogan in a snarky advertisement promoting his arts district: "Hell yeah, we're taking your artists." This drew laughs from all the people from all the different neighborhoods and states that want their own arts districts to succeed.

Part of what will make it work is to be sure the right people are doing the hoping and that it's about helping the artists help themselves. Someone in the crowd got to this point by directing a question toward the audience: Of all the people attending, how many were visual artists? How many were musicians? In each case, fewer than a dozen hands went up. Some of them were duplicates. What that means is that most of the people in the room were community development professionals, foundation program officers, a few neighborhood activists and some urban planners.

If all those people want to help both neighborhoods and artists, they could learn from ArtHome founder Esther Robinson, who spoke about engaging artists. She focuses not on neighborhoods, but on helping artists build assets and equity through financial literacy and homeownership.

Likewise from Matthew Galluzzo of Pittsburgh's Penn Avenue Arts Initiative, a CDC-run project that buys buildings and will only sell them to artists, with very little markup beyond administrative costs. The first benefit of that is that artists can afford it. The second is that when the neighborhood improves from their presence and labor, the equity stays with the artists and doesn't get siphoned off by developers.

The bottom line is that neighborhoods that want to benefit from the arts have to be about helping artists - not the other way around. Succeed at that, and the benefits to the neighborhood will follow.

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