

Let It Die. Who Really Gives A Damn Anyway?

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"...it begins with something that is very simple - it has to begin with someone who has fire in their belly, who has the passion that this is going to get done. It starts right there. But if it remains with an individual - the lone ranger - then it dies. It is these people who are not so much in love with themselves, but are in love with the idea that we are going to get these things done. And they move forward. So it always begins with that individual who has that sense of passion.

It is interesting to me that often times it is not necessarily the best idea that carries the day. It is that person who has that passion and persistence to move forward. We start there, but then they begin to work with other people. There are individuals who link with others. And they will say to me "You know, I was thinking about the same thing.

One of the things I am intrigued with is this concept of vision...The leadership books talk about a leader as someone who has a sense of vision. I find that often it is a very vague idea, but the idea is that we are going to get things done; we are going to make some improvements. That's where it starts, and then they begin to link together with other individuals."¹

- Dr. Vaughn Grisham Director of the McLean Institute for Community Development University of Mississippi

INTRODUCTION

Small towns are dying all over the country. Yours is nothing special. Everyone's moving to the big city anyway.

It's not the 20th century flee to the suburbs for a "better" lifestyle due to affluence and the automobile that's killing your town, it's the global economy squishing the life-blood out of small-town Main

Street. While the urban centers of larger city's use their tax base to rebuild themselves into "centers" once again, the American small-town centers are dwindling from a lack of funding, organization, experience, education, and just a general overall, *What in the world can we do?* mentality.

There is a solution. However, simply slowing down the death of the small-town center is not it, nor is it giving into the sprawl of subdivision developments and big-box chain stores on the outskirts of town. The answer lies in a holistic approach to urban design, planning, and implementation, where a myriad of networks and layers between businesses, municipalities, and citizens are organized and managed to bring about a thriving community.

It isn't difficult to find appreciation for small towns amongst its citizenry. Everyone wants to do *something* but feels overwhelmed and diminished as an individual. Municipalities are doing all they can to balance budgets and maintain sewers and roads. Businesses are willing to help but aren't interested in paying more tax to the municipalities because they want to choose where their financial support goes. Between municipalities and private businesses there is a third entity on the rise that provides a vehicle for collaboration in these communities: the non-profit organization.

It is the intention of this paper, which is more casual in tone and less objective in its nature than a typical conference paper, is to not only point out the issues facing small towns but to also invite the academic community to invest in these places both intellectually and physically. In contrast from the

design-idea work generated in many of the campus Community Design Programs, this paper presents the in-progress case studies of two small towns at different stages of “flipping” their downtowns by organizing its citizens into a non-profit organization and integrating multiple entities to achieve a shared interest.

Starting is the hardest part. Where does a community begin without funding, support, or expertise? More often than not, the courage and perseverance of an inexperienced citizenry that cares deeply for its town provides the means for success against all odds. A small town’s cultural identity can take center stage as its collective perspective shifts from dying to rebirth. Education, motivation, and cooperation can become an epidemic once the ball gets rolling.

THE BAD NEWS

The majority of American’s small cities originated with a well-defined center, or “downtown,” which accommodated the civic, commercial, and religious needs of the community. This triad has a deep history in city planning and was institutionalized during colonial expansion. The carry-over into the American expansion is still in existence in many American cities today. With this foundation of city planning in place, the industrial revolution fueled the development of American cities in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. During this time, the typical construction methodology was load-bearing brick walls and wood-spanned ceilings and floors. This robust material palette is a primary contributing factor to the longevity of these particular types of buildings that greatly populate many small “downtowns” of America.

Unfortunately, in many of America’s downtowns, a large percentage of these buildings are either vacant, abandoned, or being used for storage. In most instances where this condition exists, the economies of these downtowns are shrinking, and the vacancy rates of these buildings continue to rise.

Not all of America’s small downtowns are in decline, however. In the 1990’s a significant number of city dwellers moved from large cities to small cities and towns. In a press release dated June 30, 1999, the U.S. Census Bureau reported, “Smaller cities with

populations between 10,000 and 50,000 grew at a faster rate than their larger counterparts....Cities with populations between 10,000 and 50,000 grew faster (8.6 percent) than any other category.” This statistic is highest in the southern and western areas of the United States and does not reflect the status of all small towns.

With the consideration that some small towns are capable of growing their economy and increasing their populations, a critical point of interest is understanding what are the discerning factors that distinguish the growth of one small town from the decline of another. Is it only dumb-luck and geography that determine these outcomes, or is there a proactive plan that can shift the declining trend of a small downtown?

The outward growth of small towns away from their centers is usually influenced by new highways which bypass the city center and larger scaled chain business which set up shop along them. This trend of the last half of a century has killed the “mom and pop” businesses that once populated the small downtowns. However, as stated earlier, there are alternative scenarios to these conditions. In many cases, small downtown transformations are being guided by non-profit organizations that focus on developing what has become known as a “boutique economy.” A boutique economy is comprised of the cafes, bookstores, flower shops, restaurants, residential accommodations, and so forth that do not compete against “big box” economies. A boutique economy offers goods and services that are associated with experiential qualities and isn’t focused on competing for the lowest price. This specialized economy focuses on selling the pleasure of an experience in an atmosphere of other people who are enjoying a similar experience.

Small downtowns that still have their original building stock in place usually have a perfect built-in infrastructure to host a boutique economy, but the architecture alone “does not an economy make.” Many small downtowns that have an architectural infrastructure capable of supporting a boutique economy remain in a state of decline. Are the factors that differentiate these two types of small downtowns political, geographical, or social? Is a critical mass of functioning store-fronts needed in order to kick-start and sustain a boutique economy? If so, how many, and how can a community begin?

THE GOOD NEWS

One of the main catalysts for the economic birth of a traditional neighborhood development (TND's) is the fact that the developing entity of a TND is in control of enough real estate (and capital) to establish a critical mass of store-fronts at the same time. By comparison, one of the major obstacles for redeveloping a small downtown is that the real estate is usually owned in parcels by a variety of individuals. The complexities of creating consensus and a unified vision with a variety of stakeholders can be a huge deterrent for developers.

Despite this urban conundrum, some communities have found a way to transform their downtowns from ghost-towns into boom-towns. One documented course of action that has proven successful for several small downtowns is the formation of a non-profit organization that focuses either on the rehabilitation of a historic theatre or the creation of a performing arts center in a historic downtown building.

Almost all towns that were in existence during the industrial revolution have (or had) at least one theatre or opera house in a prominent location in their city center. The theatre was the cultural center of the small town, and its success was the measure of a community's social health. Unfortunately, for most American small towns, these theatres were abandoned at some point during the 20th century and have either been demolished or sit vacant in a prominent location in the town center.

In several instances throughout America, the restoration of a historical theatre has been the catalyst for jumpstarting boutique economies in small downtowns. The restoration of these historic theatres serve the same purpose for a small downtown that anchor-stores perform for shopping centers in terms of attracting additional storefronts. Additionally, restored historic theatres can help in stabilizing, and even increasing, real estate values of small downtowns.

Small town municipalities are generally not in the position to undertake and manage the restoration of a historic theatre. They are often understaffed in existing affairs and lack experienced leadership in community redevelopment. Additionally, their economies are often level or in decline. Accumulat-

ing the adequate resources and political initiative to take on the restoration of a historic theatre can be an insurmountable task, even though the individuals within the municipalities may understand the benefits that this kind of a project can bring to a community.

Existing businesses within a small downtown (and the community at large) are generally more capable of envisioning the economic benefits that a restored theatre can bring to a community. They are often eager to offer support and resources but are usually not in a position to take on the leadership role in this kind of endeavor.

For an individual to undertake the restoration of a historic theatre single handedly would require a great act of philanthropy, and while there are instances where this does occur, they are rare.

The type of support that is typically needed to restore a historic theatre in a small downtown usually comes from a variety of networked entities that are coordinated through a non-profit organization. The Internal Revenue Service issues the designation of 501(c)(3) to a non-profit organization that is set up with the intention of providing a service to the community, rather than making a profit. The structure of a 501(c)(3) organization is such that the entity is designed to carry on with its mission beyond the tenure of the individuals who may originate the non-profit. The non-profit organization is able to enter into partnerships with municipalities, apply for public grants, accept charitable donations, and is free from paying income tax. It is focused by a mission statement and governed by a board of directors and by-laws.

A non-profit organization is able to function as the unifying entity between municipalities, businesses, and the individuals of a community because it can perform many of the same functions as each of these entities, while still remaining free from some of their inherent restrictions. A non-profit can function as a business with a main objective that is something other than increasing the bottom line. Individuals are able to take action through a non-profit with the support of other like-minded people who are guided by the same mission statement. A non-profit can also apply for grants, create partnerships with municipalities and businesses, and accept charitable donations. A non-profit's ability

to incorporate a large variety of outside efforts and resources into a project, in addition to their own, afford it an opportunity for success where other entities might fail.

COLQUITT

One success story that exemplifies this scenario is that of the Colquitt Arts Council in Miller County Georgia. In 1991, with a city population of approximately 2000 and a county population of approximately 6000, two individuals with a vision to re-energize the community's pride and economy through creating and performing original plays drawn from the oral histories of Miller county created "Swamp Gravy." The name refers to a local recipe for an improvised stew or soup made from "whatever is at hand."²

The first production was performed in an elementary-school lunchroom, and two years later, the production was moved into an old cotton warehouse with dirt floors. The 9,000 square foot Cotton Hall located right off of the town square has grown into what is now considered a state-of-the-art theater. In addition to the Cotton Hall, Swamp Gravy has spun off other businesses in Colquitt such as a bed and breakfast, a restaurant, a retail store, and a mini-mall of vendors of antiques, arts and crafts. The Arts Council also operates an after-school and summer children's theatre center.³

The expenditures of the Arts Council in 2005, combined with the impact of visitors to Swamp Gravy performances, resulted in an economic boost for the local economy of \$3.1 million.⁴ In addition to its volunteer cast of 100, Swamp Gravy has become the city's fifth-largest employer with 20 full-time and 40 part-time staff members who work in administration, finance, box office and secretarial duties in all of the Arts Council endeavors. The current budget for the Arts Council is \$2.2 million with 90 percent of the revenues going back into the town through paying staff, purchasing theatre supplies and supporting its other businesses. Swamp Gravy draws 40,000 tourists to Colquitt each year, currently ten times its population.⁵

The economic success of Swamp Gravy can be considered to be a by-product of the non-profit organization's effectiveness in achieving their mission statement: "To involve as many people in a

theatrical experience that empowers individuals and bonds the community while strengthening the economy." Since its inception, over sixteen percent of the county's population has been involved in some capacity of Swamp Gravy. Through the development of self-confidence in the program, several of the actors have created supporting programs and enterprises that enhance the arts-based community revitalization. As a method of bonding the community, Swamp Gravy intentionally addresses the boundaries of age, race, class and gender in its performances and casting.⁶

In a measure that goes beyond the success of its mission statement, the non-profit organization has created The Swamp Gravy Institute, which is a training program that shares its successful strategies and values with other communities.⁷

The success of Swamp Gravy's transformation of Colquitt, Georgia is due only unto itself. There was not an additional influence that generated an economic surge that Swamp Gravy and the Arts Council catered. It was the vision and persistence of a few individuals who "really gave a damn" about their town and allowed their passion for it to spread into the community through their actions and by getting other people involved. Their refusal to sit back in a declining rural town and "Let It Die Anyway" can serve as an inspiration and model for so many of America's small towns which are in need of revitalization.

ABBEVILLE

Abbeville, Louisiana has a small downtown that is currently in decline. It has a population of 12,000 and is the parish seat of Vermilion Parish that has a population of 53,000. Founded in 1844, the original plan was modeled after a French provincial village along the Vermilion River. Its current downtown is comprised of approximately 100 historic buildings which contribute to its National Historic District classification. Approximately 20% of these buildings are vacant, and a larger percentage are in need of repair and restoration. There is very little retail left in the historic downtown, and no residential accommodations are available.

Sited on the town square is the Frank's Theatre. It was originally constructed in 1913 and enlarged in 1931. The theatre closed in 1982 and sat aban-

done for nearly 25 years until a group of citizens created a non-profit organization and purchased the theatre in 2007.

The non-profit organization, named the Allumé Society⁸ (*pronounced: al loo may*), raised the funds from within the community to purchase the theatre after the city and parish governments declined to move forward with the restoration project, even though the city secured federal and state funds for acquisition and waterproofing of the property. After the Allumé Society purchased the property, they organized a volunteer labor force to clean out the rain-damaged interior and salvage what still remained undamaged within the structure. The non-profit continued to move the project forward by soliciting goods and services from local businesses in the form of in-kind donations, organizing fundraising events that generated public awareness, working with architecture students from the University of Louisiana at Lafayette to develop design strategies and communicate with the public, applying for and receiving small state and local grants, and working with state and local elected officials to form partnerships and redirect the grants that were originally issued to the city and parish for the project.

This project, which is not yet a success story. Even though this project attempts to model itself after the Colquitt Arts Council, each circumstance is different, and success is not guaranteed. The Allumé Society has thus far only secured 15% of the funds needed for the restoration of the theatre, but has continued to move forward in phases as funding has allowed. The non-profit plans to continue operating in this manner until the project is completed.

CONCLUSION

There is a great potential for overlap between a non-profit focused on community redevelopment and the academic world of architecture. There is also a great disparity that can exist between the two. The areas in which the architectural education profession shares similarities with a community redevelopment non-profit are urban planning, design, and public service. A non-profit of this nature, especially in the beginning, is constantly dependent upon design services and planning leadership. Academic architectural programs can benefit greatly from having their students involved in the decision-making processes

of community redevelopment and participating in service learning projects.

Most outreach design entities that are housed in academia focus on planning, design, and small-scale design-build projects. The act of implementing urban planning is usually not addressed by academic programs. The general paradigm of architectural outreach programs seems to be that implementation is where architecture ends and "politics" begin. This is an unfortunate tragedy that allows so many well-laid plans to sit forever on a shelf.

The skills required for implementing community redevelopment designs through a non-profit organization such as human resource organization, grant writing, collaboration, public speaking, graphic design, economic sensibility, and construction methodology, are all emblematic of the architectural profession. For architectural programs to educate students in these skills would not be a dilution or fragmentation of the discipline, but rather an empowering tool for the implementation of urban design.

The synthesizing of the architectural firm and the non-profit organization into a single entity is gaining popularity. Whether for reasons of seeking out deficiencies in community redevelopment and acting on them, or for managing their pro bono requests, some for-profit architectural firms are creating non-profit entities. One example is the for-profit firm Peterson Architects that created the non-profit firm Public Architecture.

"... our firm incorporated a dedicated nonprofit organization called Public Architecture, which puts the resources of architecture in the service of the public interest. We act as a catalyst for public discourse through education, advocacy, and the design of public spaces and amenities. Rather than waiting for clients or funding, Public Architecture both identifies and solves practical problems of human interaction in the built environment."⁹

There is no doubt that many small downtowns across America lack the guidance and leadership required for redevelopment. If the opinion of Dr. Vaughn is correct, and the example set forth by Swamp Gravy can be applied to other communities, does this mechanism have a place in the apparatus of architecture and urban design regarding the redevelopment of small urban centers? And if so, what role can architectural education play in the development of this paradigm?

ENDNOTES

1 "Breakthrough Solutions - Harnessing the Forces of Change: Ordinary People Doing Extraordinary Things," An Interview with Dr. Vaughn Grisham, (University of Arkansas, Division of Agriculture, June 2005).

2 Linda Frye Burnham, "Swappin' Lies In Miller County: The Story of Swamp Gravy," (Atlanta, GA: *Art Papers*, 1994).

3 Carol Brzozowski, " Theater as Social Enterprise," *Social Enterprise Reporter*.

4 The Center for Creative Community Development (C3D) at Williams College.

5 Brzozowski.

6 William Cleveland, "Making Exact Change," Community Arts Network-Reading Room.

7 Ibid.

8 The author of this paper, Onézieme Mouton, is a founding member of the Allumé Society and is acting president of the non-profit at the time of this publication.

9 "Public Citizens: A New Nonprofit Provides a Model For Pro Bono Work," *Residential Architect*, John Peterson, (April, 2004).