

Gordon Square Arts District becomes a reality: Detroit Shoreway takes a huge step toward economic diversity

by Joe Narkin

(Plain Press, October 2009) As recently as 40 years ago, urban planning consisted of sequestering low-income people in public housing projects where the social ills of urban poverty tended to grow exponentially and hopelessly. At the same time, as in the South Street Development in Philadelphia in the 1960's, ghettos with appealing architecture were taken wholesale by eminent domain. Today, wealthy urban hipsters who pay armed off-duty cops to patrol the perimeters of the neighborhood dominate the South Street area.

Lately, however, economic diversity has been considered the gold standard of success for development projects designed to restore vitality to cities in decline. But has this more inclusive intent within urban development produced much better results or is it still just an unrealized theory?

NEWS ANALYSIS

It appears clear that, in most cases, attempts at economic diversity in urban redevelopment have largely failed, producing questionable outcomes and caustic controversy. In most cases, inclusion yields to de facto gentrification as urban pioneers from the suburbs learn that urban living can be downright gritty, rather than idyllic. This has been evident on the West Side of Cleveland in the Tremont and Ohio City neighborhoods where constant conflict between the poor and the gentry reigns.

For many years, Detroit Shoreway, historically a blue-collar, industrial neighborhood, has been at the forefront of combining affordable housing with business development and market rate housing. With the completion of the Streetscape Project on Detroit Avenue between West 58th to West 73rd Streets and the ongoing creation of the Gordon Square Arts District, the Detroit Shoreway neighborhood has positioned itself very well to succeed in achieving and sustaining true economic diversity.

The success to date of the Gordon Square Arts District can be largely attributable to a long-standing social justice commitment on the part of Ward 17 Councilman Matt Zone and the three primary partners in the endeavor (the Detroit Shoreway Community Development Organization, Cleveland Public Theatre, and the Near West Theatre), according to Joy Roller, Executive Director for the project.

“We needed that glue – that commitment to social justice – to get us beyond the bumps in the road,” said Roller. “These three partners always focused on the bigger goal of improving the quality of life of the residents of Detroit Shoreway and of Cleveland,” she said.

“The Gordon Square Arts District is a national model for how the arts can be used in economic development, how the public and private sector can come together” to restore an economically and culturally diverse neighborhood, said Roller.

And local residents seem to greatly appreciate the effort. “The rehab of Detroit Avenue is more like Crocker Park and will attract more people,” said Antonio “Tony” Ruggiero, 79, a retired tool

and die worker who has lived on West 69th Street with his wife Rose for 55-years. “This was a wonderful neighborhood 50-years ago” and the Gordon Square Arts District will help people want to move back here,” said Tony.

Tony recognizes Father Vincent Caruso, former pastor of Our Lady of Mt. Carmel Church, as an affordable housing pioneer in the Detroit Shoreway neighborhood, who, in 1979, helped develop Villa Mercede, an apartment complex for senior citizens and disabled individuals and, in 1980, helped incorporate Nolasco Housing Corporation, an affordable housing developer. “He was a priest, but he was a man of good mind,” said Tony, his accent reflecting his upbringing in the rural town of Coreno, Italy, 80-miles south of Rome.

“I love what they did with this,” said Henry DeLeva, 39, who was born and raised on West 69th Street. Henry was born and raised in an Italian and Irish household of nine children, which led to 32 grandchildren, and the extended family has remained in the neighborhood and owns 13 properties, most for occupancy by their large family with some units for rent. “More families are coming back to the neighborhood now that they see it as safer,” said Henry.

Henry, who at the age of 19 began with neighborhood friends the tradition of painting the colors of the Italian flag on telephone poles and fire hydrants, believes that Detroit Avenue has historically been the source of most public safety concerns in the area and that the streetscape, theaters, and new businesses have resulted in a significantly improved safety and quality of life throughout the neighborhood.

“Even residents in the neighborhood never wanted to be up there (Detroit Avenue), but it is definitely moving in the direction of good,” said Henry.

“Gordon Square will be like no other place in the U.S, said Councilman Zone at the ribbon cutting for the streetscape project on September 26, 2009. “We don’t want to be like N.Y. or Chicago; we want to be like Gordon Square, like Detroit Shoreway, like Cleveland,” said Zone.

“From 2004 to 2006, Detroit Shoreway led the city of Cleveland in market rate housing, but we also led the entire West Side of Cleveland in affordable housing,” said the councilman.

According to figures provided by Councilman Zone, the Detroit Shoreway Community Development Organization (DSCDO) has generated over \$30 million for affordable housing development in the neighborhood. DSCDO has renovated 212 affordable housing rental units and, in partnership with the Cleveland Housing Network, has rehabbed 150 lease-purchase houses for ownership by low-income families.

“And probably the most important statement about our commitment to preventing gentrification is the Gordon Square Arts District’s committing \$1 million of its capital campaign to the Neighborhood Responsibility Fund,” wrote Zone in an email correspondence. “This fund will assist the development of affordable housing and support services for low-income families,” he wrote.

The newly opened West Side Housing Center is also an example of the commitment of DSCDO. “The West Side Housing Center shows that they want to keep low-income people here,” said West Side Housing Center Director Amy Weahry, noting that the Center is located in a prime location in a Gordon Square Building storefront that could easily have been leased for a

restaurant or other business. [See the August 2009 edition of the Plain Press for coverage of the West Side Housing Center].

Zone is particularly proud that the Detroit Shoreway neighborhood has welcomed the 52 unit Emerald Commons, at West 79th and Madison, the first newly constructed, supportive housing complex for formerly homeless individuals in the City of Cleveland. The Tremont and Central neighborhoods had rejected this project, wrote Zone. DSCDO is also assisting in the rehabilitation of Cogswell Hall on Franklin Avenue, a permanent supportive housing program for women, he said.

The social justice missions of the non-profit Near West Theatre (NWT) and Cleveland Public Theatre (CPT) will also play a large role in assuring economic diversity, said Raymond Bobgan, Executive Artistic Director for CPT and a 13-year resident of the Detroit Shoreway neighborhood.

“Artists are often the first to move into a struggling neighborhood because it is inexpensive to live in, and they are often first in line to be kicked out” of a gentrified neighborhood because of occupancy costs, said Bobgan. “But this whole project is based upon the artistic community” and the success of the neighborhood is dependent upon retaining artists in the active life of the community, he said.

“The Gordon Square Arts District is essentially a theatre district now, but, in the future, there will be more focus on the visual arts,” said Bobgan, who finds Cleveland an ideal place for an artist. “My friends who have moved to places like New York spend most of their time making their living, rather than making their art,” he said. But, even now, significant attention has been paid to art throughout the streetscape under the artwork and guidance of environmental artist and streetscape designer Susan Frazier Mueller.

One of the efforts on the part of the Gordon Square Arts District to attract and retain visual artists is the creation of affordable art studio space within the long-vacant Lou’s Furniture Building which is undergoing restoration by DSCDO, said Zone.

“We are eager to move into Detroit Shoreway,” said Stephanie Morrison-Hrbek, Executive Director of NWT. “During the planning process for the Gordon Square Arts District, I attended many Ward 17 gatherings and have always been impressed by the true diversity, the welcoming spirit, and the common vision shared by blue collar residents sitting next to upscale homeowners,” said Morrison-Hrbek. “In Ohio City, I have witnessed a lot of strife between the classes,” she said, comparing the conflict in Ohio City to a civil war.

“We can make a dream a reality; we can take this dream of inclusion and expand upon it; we can take our social justice work and let it blossom” as part of the Gordon Square Arts District, said Morrison-Hrbek.

“The three partners in the Gordon Square Art District have provided the moral fabric, the underlying commitment to social justice, and are making it work,” said Roller.