

Art, Culture, Recreation and Venue as a Community Revitalization Tool

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The Joint Urban Studies Center (JUSC), a research-based think tank working in collaboration with six area colleges and universities, recently completed a study on the impact of arts, culture, recreation, and venues on community revitalization and sustainability.

Arts and culture create an economic impact on local communities and they are essential factors in developing and sustaining the communities that they serve. Communities rich in arts, culture, recreation, and venue promote local tourism and instill local pride, while stimulating economic growth for the entire region. Many cities and municipalities throughout the United States have benefited from encouraging this type of development. Decaying urban centers such as Bethlehem, Pennsylvania and San Diego, California have been rebuilt using art and cultural programs as the cornerstone to city revitalization initiatives. When implemented correctly, these programs can contribute to a city's overall image, economic value, tourism, and vitality.

Teri Ooms, JUSC Executive Director states, "Investment in arts, culture, recreation, and venue should be considered a viable initiative in community revitalization. Arts industries create jobs and provide a return on investment. People that patronize the arts, also dine out, and shop as part of the experience. Therefore, it could be stated that the arts industries create jobs in other sectors and provide tax revenue. A viable community rich in this activity also creates tourism. Local and overnight travelers patronize these activities further adding to the impact. As a result of activities that create crowds or large audiences, there is usually a decrease in crime and decay, as more people, and more activity tend to be a deterrent."

Arts activities create vibrant communities, which also present a more positive image and quality of life. In turn; this has strong economic development implications.

Many cities that have already implemented their revitalization projects did so with a strong arts and cultural base. In San Diego, California Mayor Pete Wilson implemented a plan in the 1970's to create a strong job base, retail commercial centers, and residential centers. One of his goals was to attract local artists to setup shop in the downtown district. Today, this district is known as the Gas Light district, and it is largely considered the most successful urban revitalization project. The establishments of arts and cultural centers in San Diego have helped the city become the seventh largest city in the United States.

Another successful project involved the city of Asheville, North Carolina. Asheville's use of public art met with success with the "Urban Trail" project. This project takes

tourists through the historical district and teaches them the city's history through art.

The most important factors when establishing an art or cultural center for city revitalization are planning and community cooperation. Many cities have met disaster because the city either failed to plan well for the project or failed to recognize what the focus or correct mix of activity should be. Understanding what the community wants and can support is key in the success of arts and cultural projects.

Perhaps the biggest challenge facing northeastern Pennsylvania in its success is the lack of collaboration. The Wachovia Arena, Kirby Center, the Scranton Cultural Center, and the Lackawanna County Stadium market themselves exclusively, with little or no effort to promote each other. By working together, the marketing could be much more extensive and reach more audiences. Events could be coordinated to encourage overnight visits. Many opportunities exist to enhance the assets that exist in this region.

JUSC's paper identifies other success stories from around the country and addresses how northeastern Pennsylvania could capitalize on this strategy.