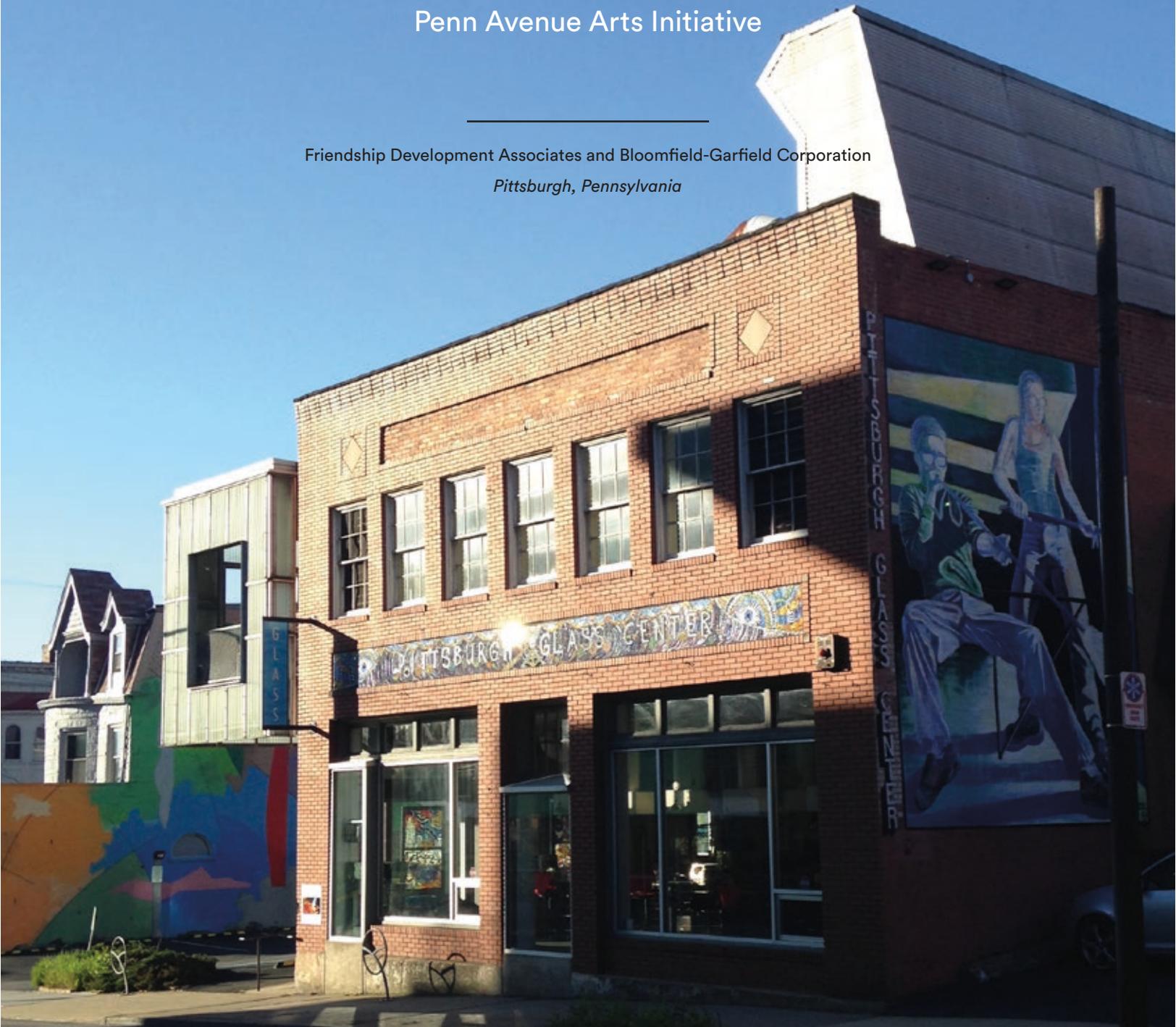


Vacancy to Vitality

in Pittsburgh's East End

Penn Avenue Arts Initiative

Friendship Development Associates and Bloomfield-Garfield Corporation
Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania



CASE STUDY OF CULTURE IN COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT

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Commissioned by **LISC**

In the late 1990s, Penn Avenue in Pittsburgh suffered the kind of dereliction that afflicts many Rust Belt commercial corridors: vacant and boarded up storefronts, dangerous levels of crime.

In 2017, Penn Avenue offers a different kind of experience.



Mural by Jordan Monahan and Chris St. Pierre on the side of the Pittsburgh Glass Center. Photo by Metris Arts Consulting

In the late 1990s, Penn Avenue in Pittsburgh suffered the kind of dereliction that afflicts many Rust Belt commercial corridors: vacant and boarded up storefronts, dangerous levels of crime. In 2017, Penn Avenue offers a different kind of experience. Little Angels Learning Academy provides daycare, and Aahmani Afrikan Braids offers hair care. Most Wanted Fine Arts is “a community service organization disguised as an art gallery.”¹ People’s Indian Restaurant is open for lunch and dinner, and Assemble hosts classes, summer camps, birthday parties, and more for learners of all ages interested in arts and technology. These and other businesses along the 12-block strip signal the emergence of a vital and economically diverse commercial corridor.

Beginning in 1998, the Penn Avenue Arts Initiative (PAAI) initiated an arts-led strategy for revitalization of the street.

Under the direction of a full-time artist-organizer, the PAAI attracted artists and arts organizations to the district by actively marketing mixed-use spaces and creating custom packages of property purchase and rehabilitation subsidies to give an ownership stake. Black artists have begun to move onto the corridor, and many of the arts and cultural organizations have worked hard to reach out to area youth to learn artistic skills and explore their creativity. Not every aspect of Penn Avenue’s turnaround worked as planned, however: the hope that a revitalized Avenue would close the seam between two racially and economically distinct neighborhoods was not fully realized.

¹ Most Wanted Fine Art, “About MWFA,” *MOST WANTED FINE ART*, accessed August 4, 2017, <http://mostwantedfineart.com/about-mwfa/>.



Mural by Therman Statom. Photo by Metris Arts Consulting

History and Context

The commercial strip along Penn Avenue witnessed a steady decline in the 1970s and 1980s, bottoming out in the mid-1990s with commercial property vacancy rates at 45 percent of total square footage and 50 unoccupied storefronts along an eight-block stretch.² During this era, the two neighborhoods bordering Penn Avenue diverged. In Friendship, lower-income but highly educated whites bent on buying and renovating homes moved in. Across the Avenue, Garfield, largely low-income and African-American, continued to lose population.

By the late 1990s, newly formed Friendship Development Associates (FDA) was seeking fresh approaches to business development and revitalization along the commercial corridor with the hope that a well-functioning strip would serve the neighborhoods better and help “zipper the seam” between the two communities. FDA’s leadership, including placemaking-minded design professionals, saw an opportunity for artists in the changing landscape. Across town in Pittsburgh’s Southside neighborhood, artists had been a main driver of revitalization throughout the 1980s. They brought high tolerance for risk, a willingness to invest sweat equity, and marketable skills to open or staff new stores and services. As rents rose in Southside, artists had moved to other neighborhoods, including Penn Avenue. A mid-1990s survey by Artists & Cities—a Pittsburgh nonprofit development company—found that fully one out of ten artists in Pittsburgh already resided in the three zip codes surrounding the Avenue.³

² Amanda Johnson Ashley, “Creating Capacity: Strategic Approaches to Managing Arts, Culture, and Entertainment Districts,” National Cultural Districts Exchange (Americans for the Arts, 2014).

³ Matthew Galluzzo, *Penn Avenue: An Arts-Based Community Development Intervention*, ed. Akwugo Emejulu, *Community Development in the Steel City: Democracy, Justice and Power in Pittsburgh* (Edinburgh: Community Development Journal Ltd., 2012).



Poster in a Penn Avenue storefront window. Photo by Metris Arts Consulting

Together with the Bloomfield-Garfield Corporation (BGC), a nonprofit community developer of affordable housing and commercial properties in the area, the FDA created the Penn Avenue Arts Initiative (PAAI) in 1998, backed by a grant from the McCune Foundation. PAAI hired a full-time artist-organizer, Jeffrey Dorsey, whose credentials included volunteer work leading small arts festivals and shows that created some of the buzz about the Avenue within the arts community. This hiring proved crucial, as Dorsey went on to broker property sales and corresponding public subsidy packages, provide technical assistance to developer-owners, market the corridor, facilitate design and planning activities, and raise funds.⁴

To complement property renovation work, Dorsey coordinated six summer festivals and hosted more than 100 monthly events called Unblurred: First Fridays on Penn, beginning with a semi-annual model in 1998. Unblurred profiled shows and events at local organizations and businesses and advertised buildings available for

⁴ Ibid.

purchase and renovation on the Avenue.⁵ “[Unblurred] was a strategy—a marketing strategy. What’s the Arts Initiative? A marketing strategy that came with a tool box, came with buy-in, to share ideas on how to renovate and a loan and grant fund to help implement those renovations and community art projects,” Dorsey says.⁶ His early colleague, Matt Galluzzo, reports that “the marketing piece proved to be particularly successful. Unblurred: First Fridays was a cat-herding exercise—getting artists to keep similar hours, update information on shows” and special events, all of which went into printed placards placed around town.⁷

The PAAI ran as a going concern until 2013, when the FDA was put in mothballs and responsibility for the strip’s continuing revitalization fell entirely to BGC. Developed with consultant support and extensive community input, a new strategic plan guides BGC’s work on the corridor today. BGC now seeks to balance continuing marketing to artists with efforts to attract community-serving non-arts businesses.⁸ Arts district marketing continues under a loose collection of volunteers managed by the Glass Center.

Physical Revitalization and Development

Over its life, the PAAI recorded enviable success in putting vacant properties into productive use. One-fifth of all the spaces on the Avenue were converted into facilities for artists, arts organizations, and related businesses,⁹ and more than 40 artists, arts organizations, and arts businesses now have

⁵ Matthew Galluzzo, personal interview, interview by Chris Walker, May 17, 2017.

⁶ Jeffrey Dorsey, personal interview, interview by Rachel Engh, May 15, 2017.

⁷ Galluzzo, personal interview.

⁸ Johnson Ashley, “Creating Capacity: Strategic Approaches to Managing Arts, Culture, and Entertainment Districts.”

⁹ Galluzzo, personal interview.



Commonplace @ Voluto, a coffee shop across the street from the Pittsburgh Glass Center, displays art by local artists. Photo by Metris Arts Consulting



Glass Lofts Condominiums and Primanti Bros. Photo by Metris Arts Consulting

affordable and/or long-term leases.¹⁰ Between 2001 and 2012, 66 new spaces hosting 10 organizations, 25 businesses (arts and non-arts), and 414 individual artists opened on the Avenue.¹¹ Vacancy rates along the strip dropped from 45 percent of all square footage to 18 percent; vacant storefronts declined from 53 percent to 28 percent.¹²

DEVELOPMENT PACKAGES TO ATTRACT ARTISTS

The FDA-BGC partnership started with a fundamental development challenge: building types along the Avenue. Narrow, three-story buildings with retail space on the first floor and upper-story residential units are functionally obsolete for modern retail. However, they are perfect for artists interested in first-floor retail and studio space and upper-story living quarters—or a rental residential unit for buyers wanting an income stream to help pay the mortgage.

The City of Pittsburgh had acquired 16 buildings on Penn Avenue through tax foreclosures, transferring ownership of eight each to FDA and BGC. The BGC had tried to fill these and other spaces for some time, without much success, until the partners identified the critical ingredient—design-subsidy packages customized for individual buyers. As FDA charter board member Stefani Danes put it: “One problem was that they [BGC] were program-driven and not investor-driven. The right strategy isn’t to promote the subsidies; it’s to tailor the subsidies to the demand.”¹³

Dorsey worked with FDA, BGC, and the Pittsburgh Design Center to create packages of renovation loans, down payment money, façade grants, and design assistance for artist-investors, each customized for those seeking to buy one of the 16 buildings. Between 2001 and 2012, the PAAI’s Artist Loan and Grant fund awarded \$96,500 in loans ranging from 1 to 5 percent interest to these and other buyers and 23 façade matching grants totaling \$137,000, matched by sweat equity, cash equity, or public money. To help realize the goal of making Penn Avenue a vehicle to connect the neighboring communities, as artists moved in they became eligible for Heinz Endowments-funded micro-grants to support creative projects with youth. In total the PAAI awarded \$60,000 to nearly 60 artists who served 600 young people.¹⁴

TARGETED AND VARIED FUNDING SOURCES

To create the customized design-subsidy packages, the PAAI utilized a favorable alignment of programs and resources from the city, the Urban Redevelopment Authority, and local foundations. Galluzzo emphasizes the considerable flexibility available to FDA, which was not itself a Community Development Financial Institution, “but found itself in the business of making loans.”¹⁵ Compared to a typical commercial corridor program, the PAAI required a fairly large investment for its staff and other operating costs. Between 2003 and 2010, Neighborhood Allies (and its predecessor organization, the Pittsburgh Partnership for Neighborhood Development, or PPND), a local affiliate of the Local Initiatives Support Corporation (LISC), contributed some \$715,000 to FDA and BGC (see Table 1). The McCune Foundation ultimately supplied the bulk of this cash, critical to ensuring stable program staffing.

¹⁰ Mary Navarro, “Penn Avenue Arts Initiative: The Next Phase. Research Findings and Recommendations,” September 2013.

¹¹ Dorsey, personal interview.

¹² Navarro, “Penn Avenue Arts Initiative: The Next Phase. Research Findings and Recommendations.”

¹³ Stefani Danes, personal interview, interview by Chris Walker, May 16, 2017.

¹⁴ Navarro, “Penn Avenue Arts Initiative: The Next Phase. Research Findings and Recommendations.”

¹⁵ Ibid.

PAAI provided local businesses \$815,000 in real estate project funding, of which LISC invested \$375,000 in loans and grants, and PPND provided another \$172,000 in early-stage predevelopment funding. More recent investments continue to add spaces for arts organizations and new low-income residents. For example, in 2016 ACTION Housing developed the Penn Matilda Apartments on Penn Avenue, which houses 39 units of affordable housing—many reserved for veterans—as well as new homes for two arts organizations, Assemble and Level Up Studios. Federal Low-Income Housing Tax Credit equity from LISC’s National Equity Fund covered \$8.8 million of the total \$11.5 million development cost (see Table 2).

DEVELOPMENT OUTSIDE OF THE ARTS

Nonprofits and businesses on the Avenue today that are not involved in the arts span a range of activity. The Eastside Neighborhood Employment Center offers workforce development, job readiness training, career counseling, and job placement. The Thomas Merton Center works for peace and social justice. Pho Minh serves Vietnamese food. Family Dollar sells a range of discounted goods.

In addition, considerable Urban Redevelopment Authority funding flowed into multifamily housing development, senior housing, and commercial mixed-use projects on and around Penn Avenue.¹⁶ The nearby Children’s Hospital renovated and expanded its facilities, and the Children’s Home did the same. Penn Avenue also underwent reconstruction during this period, and although it was highly disruptive, it did not undermine the Avenue’s core economic vitality.¹⁷

¹⁶ Thomas Cummings, personal interview, interview by Chris Walker, May 16, 2017.

¹⁷ Anonymous interviewee, personal interview, May 16, 2017.

TABLE 1
Penn Avenue Arts Initiative (PAAI)

	Amount (\$)
Neighborhood Allies Capacity Building Grants	715,000
East End Growth Fund Program Grants	100,000
East End Growth Fund 0% interest, forgivable loans	59,000
Total PAAI Support	874,000

Values rounded to the nearest thousand

TABLE 2
Penn Mathilda Apartments

	Amount (\$)
National Equity Fund Low Income Housing Tax Credit Equity	8,800,000
ACTION Housing Sponsor Loan	1,300,000
Urban Redevelopment Authority of Pittsburgh HOME Funds	1,150,000
Urban Redevelopment Authority of Pittsburgh Urban Development Action Grant	250,000
Total Development Cost	11,500,000

Values rounded to the nearest thousand



Mural on Penn Avenue by Tarish Pipkins. Photo by Metris Arts Consulting

The PAAI's record of accomplishment is the more remarkable given the many titling and tax lien issues associated with distressed commercial properties on Penn Avenue, some of which were tied up in estates, others owned by people who simply could not be found. Unfortunately, these challenges have become more serious over time; the more easily developed BGC properties have been renovated and sold, and what remains requires more money and more effort. At the same time, some of the neophyte owners who have bought into the corridor as speculative investors have little expertise in development, and so they leave the buildings to languish, while other owners have sat on properties for some time, removing them from the active market.

Economic and Neighborhood Effects

On economic development grounds alone, the PAAI was an unambiguous success: The corridor registered growth in spite of overall city decline, at least in part because Penn Avenue moved from a fledgling arts enclave to a recognized contributor to the regional cultural fabric.¹⁸

¹⁸ Galluzzo, *Penn Avenue: An Arts-Based Community Development Intervention*.

This strategy was one of the ambitions of PAAI's framers, who aspired to "re-regionalize" the street, drawing early support from foundation staff pleasantly surprised by artists "speaking the language of community development."¹⁹ As measured by Unblurred participant surveys, over time the PAAI saw increased numbers of visitors from outside the immediate area, an indicator of shifting perceptions of the strip and a geographic broadening of its appeal.²⁰

Penn Avenue's viability as a commercial corridor also improved with the blossoming of the adjacent Friendship residential market and nascent revitalization of the nearby East Liberty neighborhood and commercial district.²¹ A purchase-rehab program for homes in the community encouraged in-migration of artists (many of them low-income people who were younger, or who had been moved out of other artists enclaves because they never got ownership), who became advocates for, and participants in, efforts to improve the corridor. And what really made the corridor unique was that it was unlike any other main street in Pittsburgh. Instead of being the center of a homogeneous ethnic group, it was

¹⁹ Rob Stephany, personal interview, interview by Chris Walker, May 15, 2017.

²⁰ Galluzzo, *Penn Avenue: An Arts-Based Community Development Intervention*.

²¹ Stephany, personal interview.

the edge of several very different neighborhoods with a mix of 10 different ethnicities on the street—Vietnamese and Indian restaurants, for example. The success of PAAI was in using the arts to bring together all of those different groups, where everyone could call the place home.²²

However, the Aldi grocery store on Penn Avenue appears to be one of the few new businesses that cater to the traditional African-American Garfield community, joining other businesses on the strip that offer services customarily found in low-income neighborhoods: convenience outlets, barber shops and beauty salons, and clothing stores.

ARTS AND ARTISTS BRING IN MORE ARTS AND ARTISTS

These changes reflect the momentum created by artists' demand for affordable space and the hard work and imagination of Dorsey and his colleagues. As Unblurred called attention to the Avenue, the PAAI stood ready to help artists renovate spaces and market their offerings. Moreover, several early anchor developments helped hike the visibility of the strip. The Pittsburgh Glass Center—a nationally recognized glass-art facility—opened on Penn Avenue in 2001 after the FDA had purchased the building and held it until they could assemble financing,²³ and the following year Dance Alloy, which draws patrons from throughout the region, came to the Avenue as well.

Following these local anchors, other arts organizations and businesses began operations on the Avenue or relocated there: The Irma Freeman Center presents arts exhibitions and offers classes and workshops in African drumming, sound production, and DIY maker projects.



The Irma Freeman Center for Imagination. Photo by Metris Arts Consulting

Assemble hosts exhibitions and classes on topics related to science, art, and technology. BOOM Concepts provides gallery and performance space and a nurturing community for music, spoken word, and visual artists committed to social justice. Individual artists' studios and gallery spaces line the Avenue.

THE AVENUE AS AN ECONOMIC CLUSTER

Penn Avenue has, over time, created an arts-and-cultural economic cluster, characterized by a concentration of arts and arts-related businesses and organizations that, per economic theory, benefit from the common infrastructure, shared retail market, a pool of skilled workers, and nearby suppliers that geographic proximity enables.²⁴ Businesses along Penn Avenue report some of these features.

Some arts businesses report that new spaces and proximity to other arts groups have been important to their business. BOOM Concepts developed relationships with the nearby Most Wanted gallery and Assemble, for example. They have shared equipment, co-sponsored events, and otherwise exchanged information about happenings on the strip.²⁵ Assemble, without a space for a month,

22 Dorsey, personal interview.

23 Heather McElwee, personal interview, interview by Rachel Engh, May 15, 2017.

24 Harold Wolman and Diana Hincapie, "Clusters and Cluster-Based Development Policy," *Economic Development Quarterly* 29, no. 2 (2015): 135–49, doi:10.1177/0891242413517136.

25 Thomas Agnew, personal interview, interview by Chris Walker, May 16, 2017.

ran its summer camp through Mr. Roboto Project, a cooperatively-run show space and art gallery.

Says Nina Barbuto of Assemble:

We share things with our different neighbors Level Up and Silver Eye. We share tables, hammers, coffee, sugar. We do different events, write different grants, with BOOM Concepts and Bunker Projects gallery.... I meet about once a month with Janera, the ED of The Kelly Strayhorn Theatre, and other folks, to tell each other what we're doing, how we can co-promote. If they're doing an event, we'll be there. Or how we can do summer camps better together. I've personally taught at the Irma Freeman Center. The GA/GI Festival [a multidisciplinary showcase of art, technology, ecology and performance in multiple Penn Avenue venues] is whatever Christine Bethea puts together.²⁶

In the music scene, BOOM Concepts is becoming an important incubator for local hip-hop artists. "Boom is a space where up-and-coming artists can shape their music and learn from each other and more established musicians," says co-founder and operations manager Thomas Agnew.²⁷ In another example, Heather McElwee, director of Pittsburgh Glass Center, says, "Tech Shop is located a mile down the street, a nationally-known place with a 3D printer and waterjet cutter. It's the only one in this region. I can't help but think that they chose that location [because of] some coloration with Penn Avenue and the arts that are happening here."²⁸

McElwee says the Glass Center has found Penn Avenue to be a productive location, as well: "In 2002, we had 500 students. Now there are over 7,500. The economics of the Glass Center [has changed]—we're now

26 Nina Barbuto, personal interview, interview by Rachel Engh, May 16, 2017.

27 Agnew, personal interview.

28 McElwee, personal interview.

able to earn more of our income and rely less on public support."²⁹ This expansion contributes to demand for spaces on the Avenue: To house visiting artists, teaching assistants, summer intensive participants, and participants in its tech apprentice program, the center bought a four-bedroom condominium in an FDA development and the "bride house" across the street, and it rents other units on the Avenue, as well. (Note that, although not necessarily a neighborhood impact, the Glass Center has attracted 40 glass artists to Pittsburgh.)

BENEFITS OF THE CLUSTER BEYOND ARTS AND CULTURE

The growing arts-and-cultural cluster also seems to have attracted increasing numbers of nonprofits and educational organizations, restaurants, and other service related professions.³⁰ "[Penn Avenue] became a cool place to be. When budding restaurants were looking for a place that was going to be awesome, Penn Ave was one of them," McElwee says.³¹

Barbuto says that the opening of the Aldi was a turning point:

[Grocery stores were] worried if [this neighborhood] could sustain a grocery store because it's a lower-income neighborhood.... But with social media, people are getting the word out, and I'm pretty sure Aldi is doing well. People are walking there, it helps sustain the neighborhood. People don't need to drive [out of the neighborhood] or they can take the bus somewhere else... It has helped the neighborhood's [access to] fresh food, inexpensive items.³²

29 Ibid.

30 Samantha McDonough, "A Five-Year Strategic Plan 2014-2019 for the Penn Avenue Corridor, for the Penn Avenue Steering Committee," n.d.

31 McElwee, personal interview.

32 Barbuto, personal interview.

Taken together, the changes to the corridor and explicit strategies for public safety have driven down crime—a clear benefit to the community. “BGC did some good work on this: a focus on problem properties, work with the DA’s office to target known dealers, and so on. Increased activity and eyes on the street turned out to be a big effect on crime,” Galluzzo says.³³ McElwee says: “In 2001, people used to call and ask, ‘Is it safe to park here, safe to come here at night?’ It’s so interesting to us the change that has happened over the last 15 years for the better. Nobody doesn’t know where we are, people know about Penn Ave, no one asks if it’s safe.”³⁴

CREATING ARTIST EQUITY

The interest in PAAI buildings and subsidies was fueled in part by out-migration of artists from the increasingly pricey Southside. As has been the case elsewhere, ownership of their own spaces continues to be the best levee for artists and business owners against a rising tide of escalating rents. The BGC continues to own commercial properties on the street and provides discounted rents to both older and newer tenants.

Determined not to meet the same fate as Southside, the PAAI also pursued an artists’ equity strategy, whereby artists could purchase properties and thereby benefit from escalation of their value and be protected from rising rents. “That model of selling to artists so that artists can come up with the community is what made a huge difference here. It’s not like you sell to whoever and then the artists can’t afford it anymore as it’s growing. Instead, they’re gaining more equity; it helps enhancing their careers. It’s a wonderful vision that made this place so unique. Artists will remain here because they bought into it,”³⁵ says ceramic artist Laura Jean McLaughlin.

³³ Galluzzo, personal interview.

³⁴ McElwee, personal interview.

³⁵ Laura Jean McLaughlin, personal interview, interview by Rachel Engh, May 15, 2017.



BOOM Concepts. Photo by Metris Arts Consulting



Pittsburgh Glass Center. Photo by Metris Arts Consulting

At the same time, some artists have begun to cash out as prices rise.

Social Impacts

The early zipper theory held that increased activity on the Avenue could help bridge two very dissimilar neighborhoods by fostering inter-community ties,³⁶ but our interviews turned up a general disappointment with the outcome. On the one hand, crime on the Avenue went down and Garfield youth participation, however episodic, did increase. Some arts organizations on the Avenue cater to members of the community or share its racial makeup. The community's identity can be read from the physical surroundings: A memorial to a community man now departed occupies a prominent wall. There are murals of an African-American bride ascending a staircase and of the streetcar line that once ran up the Avenue. A poem on the side of a restaurant calls on black and white people to "unremember your learnings" and move forward together.³⁷

But in part due to the relative dearth of new black-owned arts businesses, the community's claim to the corridor appears to have eroded.

"We didn't have a good metric for what would happen. We wanted to see the edge of Friendship as a stabilizer for Garfield, perhaps by pulling the market across Penn Avenue to get the appraisals up in Garfield," Galluzzo says of the early days.³⁸ "There was the dream of a zipper, but it turned into a barrier. Social and economic change came for the hipster class, but the early emphasis on youth programming faded with the erosion of financial support."³⁹

36 Galluzzo, *Penn Avenue: An Arts-Based Community Development Intervention*.

37 Direct observation.

38 Galluzzo, personal interview.

39 Anonymous interviewee, personal interview, May 17, 2017.

The new strategic plan for the Avenue ruefully recognizes that "business and cultural events should reflect the broad range of cultural interests and needs of the people who live here [to] become the 'zipper' we had been imagined to be so long ago."⁴⁰

The benefits from growth, especially for arts businesses, did not flow proportionately to African-American artists, a judgment universally acknowledged by those we spoke with. In part, this stemmed from an early misconception of how to best advance equity. The Heinz Endowments supported a small grants program intended to help artists reach into the Garfield neighborhood, but equity strategies did not extend more deeply into the core of the program itself to help artists acquire space and build financial assets. Early program staff admit as much.

Recognizing these gaps in its strategy, the Heinz Endowments has in later years directly supported securing of spaces by African-American artists, such as BOOM Concepts. Unfortunately, with the real estate market on Penn Avenue having already shifted due to its success, these late-arriving artists can no longer benefit from the ownership strategy for arts-based businesses pursued early on.

THE AVENUE'S RELATIONSHIP WITH GARFIELD

To the question of whether Penn Avenue as a commercial corridor helps African Americans, there seems to be a difference of opinion on whether the Avenue serves the Garfield neighborhood or not.⁴¹ The PAAI's early leaders and their supporters conceived of social equity primarily

40 McDonough, "A Five-Year Strategic Plan 2014-2019 for the Penn Avenue Corridor, for the Penn Avenue Steering Committee."

41 Navarro, "Penn Avenue Arts Initiative: The Next Phase. Research Findings and Recommendations."

in terms of youth participation. First Fridays did prove to be a diverse experience. Neighborhood youth, for instance, came to the Most Wanted shows.⁴² The BGC recently added a night market which draws a more diverse crowd than just the white hipsters. Jason Sauer of Most Wanted hired youth from the neighborhood, including adjudicated ones, to work on community projects, supported by PAAI. “This was the exciting part about what we were doing,” says Galluzzo.⁴³

Mary Navarro, local consultant, points out that positive developments like these, however, are not consistent or deeply woven into the plans for Penn Avenue’s development: “Activities were opportunistic and sporadic and dependent on funding streams that were not always large enough or consistent enough for this to be considered an integrated program.”⁴⁴ The micro-grants supported by Heinz Endowments benefitted youth and the artists, for instance, but they weren’t as strategic as they needed to be in order to build long-term buy-in.⁴⁵

According to Heinz Endowments’ Rob Stephany:

We took a knife to a gunfight. There are “artists,” “teachers,” and “teaching artists,” and they’re not the same. We needed teaching artists, but we didn’t always have that. The program called for youth outreach and cultural competency, but the RFPs and outreach to artists didn’t specify that. The artists who did try had cultural competency in spades; however, teaching children was a skill many had not mastered. It’s only a small group of artists that can do teaching well, although there were “moments of brilliance.”⁴⁶

42 Anonymous interviewee, personal interview, May 17, 2017.

43 Galluzzo, personal interview.

44 Navarro, “Penn Avenue Arts Initiative: The Next Phase. Research Findings and Recommendations.”

45 Anonymous interviewee, personal interview, May 15, 2017.

46 Stephany, personal interview.



Pittsburgh Glass Center glassblowing studio. Photo by Pittsburgh Glass Center

Stephany adds that Heinz has learned from the experience and adjusted course accordingly. “Over the years, we’ve gotten a lot smarter. We didn’t understand then the power of neighborhood [African-American] artists. When the Endowments recruited more diverse staff who had a stronger grasp of the community, it changed our understanding and our relationships. As a result we do much more work now within community-based cultural groups and with social justice artists,” he says.⁴⁷

THE GROWTH OF AFRICAN-AMERICAN BUSINESS AND ARTS ON THE AVENUE

Nevertheless, a range of artists-educators now occupy spaces on the corridor, and many of the arts organizations have a youth focus, including the Irma Freeman Center, Assemble, the Pittsburgh Glass Center, and Dance Alloy. On Penn Avenue, the arts community appears to generally accept that social engagement should be part of what individual artists and arts organizations do, and the ties between arts organizations and Garfield may be strengthening.

47 Ibid.

Heather McElwee reports that the Pittsburgh Glass Center’s efforts to reach into Garfield led it to develop collaborations through its micro-granting process, like one forged with Brothers and Sisters Emerging, which wanted to expand beyond its sports program by sending students for after-school classes.⁴⁸ Thomas Agnew of BOOM Concepts observes that “BOOM is important to Garfield. It shows that people like themselves are represented. They are welcome, anybody can come in. They see *us*, so they know they can achieve.”⁴⁹

McLaughlin reports that for her ceramics business, “more recently, I’ve had a lot more African-American people coming into the First Fridays, feeling comfortable coming in.” Asked what changed, she says: “Over time, maybe, curiosity. A lot of the newer venues—BOOM Concepts—they’re bringing awareness. Assemble has always been welcoming to the community. Over time, people are feeling comfortable coming to the events.”⁵⁰

Systemic Effects

The community development industry in Pittsburgh takes some justifiable pride in the success of the Penn Avenue commercial strip over the last 15 years. Penn Avenue does not “read” as a dramatic and total transformation, but as an eclectic mix of building types and uses that reflect an incremental, organic, community-scale process.

At the same time, whether due in part to Penn Avenue Arts Initiative or not, Agnew believes that support is growing for individual artists locally as well: “Better access to public support, residencies, foundation money flow to artists.” He adds, however, that there can be

more systems to help artists understand how to make art a career. “[A]rtists need to learn how to take advantage of that, a mentoring that I am often called on to provide. How do you get over rejection and learn from the process?”⁵¹

The work on Penn Avenue also does not have systems to put artists at the center of the revitalization work. For example, the Urban Redevelopment Authority, although important in the provision of subsidies to affordable space development, has limited ability to influence arts and cultural uses in the properties it supports. “We can generally tell people what they *can’t* do with our subsidies in the buildings they develop, but we can’t tell them what they *should* do,” says the URA’s Tom Cummings.⁵²

All in all, the revitalization of Penn Avenue yields important lessons for community developers in Pittsburgh and elsewhere. Creative hard work, flexible financing, access to property, good marketing, and some favorable tailwinds, like artists needing affordable space and a nearby neighborhood on the rise, produced a dramatic economic transformation.

A concentration of socially minded artists and arts organizations, deliberately supported by local foundations and community organizations, created opportunities for local youth to learn skills and express themselves artistically. Explicit philanthropic support for minority artists, although belated, enabled those artists to gain a foothold on the Avenue. A new and perhaps harder challenge now confronts the Penn Avenue community: Hold on to the gains while also resisting pressures to gentrify. The same creative hard work that made the new Avenue possible will be needed to keep it that way.

48 McElwee, personal interview.

49 Agnew, personal interview.

50 McLaughlin, personal interview.

51 Agnew, personal interview.

52 Cummings, personal interview.

Interviews

Thomas Agnew, *BOOM Concepts*

Nina Barbuto, *Assemble*

Thomas Cummings,

The Urban Redevelopment Authority of Pittsburgh

Stefani Danes, *Friendship Development Associates*

Jeffrey Dorsey, *Union Project*

David Ennis, *Affirmative Investments, Inc.*

Dr. Amber Epps, *Bloomfield-Garfield Corporation*

Matthew Galluzzo, *The Lawrenceville Corporation*

Justin Laing, *Hillombo LLC*

Heather McElwee, *Pittsburgh Glass Center*

Laura Jean McLaughlin, *Independent Artist*

Michele Morris, *Friendship Development Associates*

Nicolette Pawlowski, *Los Sabrosos Dance Company*

Laurel Randi, *The McCune Foundation*

Janet Sarbaugh, *The Heinz Endowments*

Jason Sauer, *Pittsburgh's Most Wanted Fine Art Gallery*

Skip Schwab, *East Liberty Development, Inc.*

Rob Stephany, *The Heinz Endowments*

Jason Vrabel, *Downstream.city*



Decorative tree grate on Penn Avenue. Photo by Metris Arts Consulting



Door with map of Penn Avenue. Photo by Metris Arts Consulting

With residents and partners, LISC forges resilient and inclusive communities of opportunity across America—great places to live, work, visit, do business and raise families. Since 1980, LISC has invested \$17.3 billion to build or rehab 366,000 affordable homes and apartments and develop 61 million square feet of retail, community and educational space.

Launched in 2009, Metris Arts Consulting believes in the power of culture to enrich people's lives and help communities thrive. We believe those benefits should be broadly shared and inclusively developed. Metris seeks to provide high caliber planning, research, and evaluation services to reveal arts' impacts and help communities equitably improve cultural vitality. To accelerate change, we seek to share knowledge and amplify the voices of those closest to the work.

Cover: Pittsburgh Glass Center. *Photo by Metris Arts Consulting*
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