

The Arts and Smart Growth: A Comparative Analysis of Second Street Studios, NM and Chinatown, Singapore.

With its great potential to connect people, attract youth and energy, and revitalize a community's image, the arts can play an important role in achieving smart growth objectives in urban neighborhoods (Fulton & Newman, 2002). Smart growth encourages restoration of community and vitality to center cities and older suburbs. Projects are transit and pedestrian-oriented, and promote compact, in-fill development of a mix of housing, commercial and retail uses (Benfield *et al*, 2001). In urban settings, the arts and smart growth can be strategically combined to create affordable spaces for artists to utilize and congregate in, effectively attracting reinvestment and redevelopment in forgotten neighborhoods (Fulton & Newman, 2002). Two such examples of notable success are the Second Street Studios in Santa Fe, New Mexico, and Chinatown in Singapore. This paper discusses and compares some of the features of these two projects, and examines the role of the arts in revitalizing the respective neighborhoods in the spirit of the smart growth movement.

Santa Fe, New Mexico, a city famous for its galleries and gift shops, is the home for upscale artists and destination for art-loving tourists. However, start-up businesses and novice artists often find it difficult to set up shop downtown amongst the gentrified areas. Second Street Studios was purposefully planned and developed to provide these groups with affordable but attractive spaces to market products and display artworks (Benfield *et al*, 2001).

The 80,000 ft² community was constructed around a series of courtyards lined with trees. The buildings were designed with 70 two-storied live/work units, with the ground floor being used as studios, shops or workspaces, and the upper level as residential lofts (Benfield *et al*, 2001). Project developers Susan and Wayne Nichols, Jonathan Rose Companies LLC and planner Peter Calthorpe envisioned a flexible arrangement in which residents can interchange the functions of the second floor from work to living spaces, forming a vibrant and lively "24-hour neighborhood" that remains active in day and night. Indeed, this ensued,

immediately attracting a diverse mix of artists, craftspeople, small, unorthodox businesses such as a software development firm, a salsa maker, a print maker, furniture maker, a yoga center and even a toy inventor (Jonathan Rose Companies, LLC). Collectively, they formed a community with a distinct spirit and energy previously absent from the old, blue-collar, industrial neighborhood of railway shops (Figure 1).



Figure 1. Second Street façade of the old Machine Shop (Wikipedia.com)

Several features of the Second Street Studios project contribute to sustainable design and smart growth. The live/work arrangement of the studios serves three purposes: it eliminates the need for residents to commute to and fro from their homes to work, efficiently utilizes urban space by compacting commercial and residential uses into a single building, and provides affordable rental for start-up businesses and artists even without subsidies. Buildings were designed with some passive environmentally sensitive features such as natural day-lighting and sun-shading to accommodate to New Mexico's warm climate. Residents also participate in a community water recycling program that helps reduce their utility bills (Benfield *et al.*,2001).

A key aim of smart growth is to create neighborhoods that are pedestrian friendly, encourage interaction, and provide alternatives to driving. Second Street Studios is extremely walkable with attractive, lush, sunlight-filled courtyards, bright colors typical of a New Mexico marketplace plaza that add to the visual appeal of strolling in the neighborhood (Figure 2).



Figure 2. Second Street Studios and its tree-lined courtyard (Jonathan Rose Companies, LLC).

In addition, there is excellent bicycle accessibility to the town center through a trail that runs parallel to a rail line adjacent to the studios. Downtown is only two miles away. Neighborhood activists are also campaigning for a permanent train stop to be built along the rail line, seeking to connect their street even more strongly to the rest of Santa Fe (Benfield *et al.*, 2001).

Becoming an established tourist destination for shopping and art browsing, the community has gradually formed a strong sense of identity that embodies the creativity and vibrancy of Second Street Studios and its tenants. Festivals and activities are often held to attract visitors. For example, the annual “Second Street Experience” is held with yard sales, educational art workshops and live music performances. In this year’s event, the street was closed for one day to invite people to “Get out of your cars” and walk down Second Street (SantaFe.com).

Figure 3. Second Street Studios community picnic in 2001 (Jonathan Rose Companies, LLC)

On the other side of the globe, the Arts Housing Scheme in Singapore's Chinatown is not too different from the Second Street Studios development. Singapore is a small city-state in Southeast Asia that had developed rapidly since its independence in 1965 to achieve developed nation status in the 1990s. Chinatown was originally a designated area for Chinese immigrants when Singapore was first founded by Sir Stamford Raffles. The neighborhood was subdivided into areas that were inhabited primarily by Chinese from different provinces in China. Once, Chinatown was an area of bustling economic and social activity, scattered with shop-houses, ethnic clan associations, gambling dens, pawnshops and temples. In the wake of Singapore's rigorous development, the remaining dilapidated shop-houses and crumbling buildings were abandoned as residents moved out into high-rise public housing subsidized by the government (Figure 4). Uninhabited buildings in Chinatown were torn down to make way for commercial buildings in the area capitalizing on its centralized location.



Figure 4. Dilapidated, crumbling shop-houses in Chinatown (left) and cleaned, restored shop-houses post-redevelopment (right). (George P. Landow, G.P. and Rosenthal, J.C.)

Fortunately, the Singapore government recognized the cultural value of Chinatown and sought to preserve the neighborhood's unique heritage and character. In 1998, a plan to redevelop Chinatown was drawn up to clean up the streets, restore and preserve historical buildings. The plan was spearheaded by several governmental agencies, such as the Singapore Tourism Board and Urban Redevelopment Agency. However, despite redevelopment, most of the original residential and commercial tenants abandoned the neighborhood as they were not able to afford the increased rents of the area, leaving behind a shell of what Chinatown used to be.

Chinatown's Arts Housing Scheme, coinciding with the objectives of the Second Street Studios project, was meant to provide affordable spaces to local arts groups and their activities, in order to facilitate the development of an active Singapore arts scene (National Arts Council of Singapore). The upper stories of a row of eight buildings in Chinatown were acquired, refurbished and allocated to arts groups for their activities. Many of these buildings are pre-war warehouses and old shophouses that are lovingly preserved for their historical value, and served as appropriate environments for artistic expression and cultural appreciation. The area houses mainly traditional arts groups such as Cantonese Opera, Beijing Opera, music, theatre, calligraphy and literature (Figure 5). Under this scheme, arts housing rental is heavily subsidized by the National Arts Council. Buildings can house a single or several arts groups/artists as well as non-arts tenants and arts groups together.

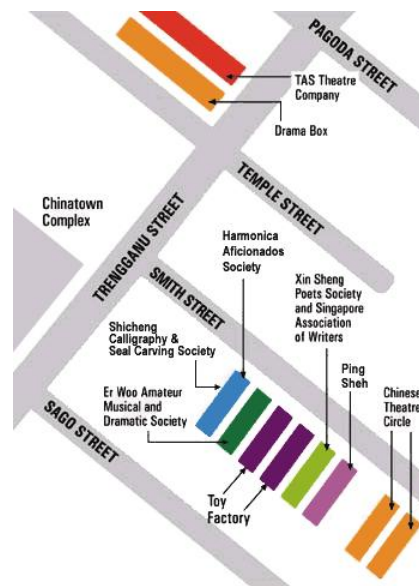


Figure 5. Map of Chinatown and its arts belt formed under the Arts Housing Scheme (National Arts Council, Singapore).

Similar to Santa Fe's Second Street Studios, the result of this adaptive reuse project proved to be multi-fold: it successfully revitalized the cultural flavor and heritage of Chinatown, and attracted reinvestment in the area. A myriad of artistic activities such as classes, festivals and performances quickly connected both locals and tourists back to the Chinatown neighborhood and its rich history. It also proved to be an effective solution to boost the rather low-key local arts scene. Along with the opening of a Chinatown mass rapid transit station to serve a critical mass of people, street markets, shopping centers, public housing blocks and commercial offices developed in the neighborhood. As the crowd is wooed back

to Chinatown, the district has finally reignited into a lively, textured and bustling atmosphere of its hey-day (Figure 5).



Figure 5. Chinatown's crowded night market during festive seasons (WorldAtlas.com).

In both case studies, smart growth principles are achieved by utilizing the arts as a binding force to connect people to place and injecting new life to old buildings. They are comparable in their effectiveness in creative reuse of old abandoned buildings to provide affordable spaces for artistic activities and small businesses. By taking advantage of existing infrastructure, there is no need to consume more land and energy elsewhere. Indirectly, this conserves open space and critical environmental areas that may otherwise have been destroyed for urban development. The arts have consequently added economic value and attracted reinvestment to neglected areas of the cities, a key feature of sustainable design. Positive changes including increased tourism, street festivals and commercial developments in the area, and a renewed sense of community identity are "spill-over" effects from the arts and its activities.

In addition, both neighborhoods promote auto-independence by creating pedestrian-friendly paths with shaded sidewalks and compact commercial/residential units. In the case of Singapore's Chinatown, visitors truly have a wide variety of transportation choices due to its convenient and efficient public transport system. Mass transit and frequent buses make it extremely well-connected to the rest of the city. By deploying the creative energy of the arts as a change agent, the two old, forgotten communities underwent a "renaissance" that successfully attracted a critical mass back to the area, which justifies the need for transportation, residential and commercial infrastructure development. This in turn acts as a positive feedback by luring even more people and activities into the neighborhoods.

Although the Santa Fe's Second Street Studios and Singapore's Chinatown share many similar characteristics of sustainable design, they do possess an important difference. Second Street Studios was planned primarily to provide cheap but attractive spaces for young artists and small local businesses to rent in lieu of the downtown locations. For these tenants, Second Street Studios may serve as a temporary stepping stone to a better and more upscale location. In fact, Jonathan Rose, President of the Affordable Housing Development Corporation, and a key developer of the project, says that over seven years, "[they] have housed hundreds of businesses, some of which have been with us since day one, but many of whom have moved on because they outgrew their spaces" (Affordable Housing Development Corporation). However, the up-side of this high turnover rate is that the community is always dynamic and youthful. In contrast, the arts housing scheme in Singapore's Chinatown is more focused on restoration and showcasing its heritage, hence it houses mostly more established and traditional arts groups. This generates a sense of nostalgia and reminiscence, which greatly differs from Second Street Studios. Such differences only emphasize the uniqueness and variety of smart growth projects, which reflect local community values and cultures while embracing common principles.

The two projects appear, in terms of physical design, to be equally effective models of smart growth. However, smart growth goes beyond physical features; it also focuses on the process of planning and development. Community collaboration is a critical feature of this process. Without active citizenry and bottom-up vision, development projects will not have staying power because the community does not support nor have ownership over decisions. This was observed in the Chinatown redevelopment project, which was driven largely by the Singapore government, instead of through community and stakeholder engagement. The 1998 blueprint to redevelop Chinatown included a plan to zone the area into parts that were themed according to the five Chinese elements of fire, wind, water, earth and metal (Zhu *et al.*, 2006) This was vigorously opposed by the frustrated public, who felt that Chinatown was being reengineered culturally into a theme park for tourists, instead of to "service the economic, social and spiritual needs" of its residents (Zhu *et al.*, 2006). This part of the plan was eventually retracted after an angsty public debate, but this incident clearly highlights the long-term unsustainability of a unilateral developmental process without meaningful consultation. In comparison, Santa Fe's Second Street Studios surpassed Chinatown with its inclusive, community-centered approaches at development.

In conclusion, these two case studies reveal significant potential for the arts to be an innovative “seed” for smart growth in an urban setting. In Singapore’s Chinatown, not only did the congregation of arts groups and cultural products evolve into a charming tourist haven, it also helped revitalize and reconnect the local community to the district. In the case of Second Street Studios in Santa Fe, adaptive reuse of railway shops for arts studios and small businesses channeled creative energy and vibrancy back into the community, which increased the livability, reputation and real estate value of a previously distressed urban area. Together with smart growth principles such as walkability, mixed-use neighborhoods, affordable housing, community and stakeholder collaboration, the arts can be utilized as an effective mechanism to rebuild our cities into attractive, lively and flourishing communities.

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