

Thoughts on Fostering an Arts District in Downtown Wilkes-Barre

By Larry Newman, Executive Director, Diamond City Partnership
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The Diamond City Partnership – Wilkes-Barre’s nonprofit downtown management organization and the caretaker of our community’s vision for Downtown Wilkes-Barre – has included the following statement as one of the six goals of its current Five Year Downtown Action Plan:

“Downtown Wilkes-Barre will be a regional center of arts, culture, dining, and entertainment.”

Why does that goal serve as one of the cornerstones of our current downtown plan? There are a number of reasons:

Arts and Quality of Place:

It’s widely understood that a strong local arts and culture sector benefits its community’s quality of place, attracts business, leads to job creation, generates tourism, and enhances the lives of all local residents.

In today’s economy, quality of life is economic development.

Vibrant communities have active arts and culture programs. In turn, vibrant communities attract vibrant companies and talented people - resulting in meaningful economic development.

While technology and infrastructure advancements allow companies, in theory, to locate almost anywhere, today’s knowledge-driven businesses choose the locations that offer the deep pools of qualified labor that they need to make their enterprises succeed. And, increasingly, human capital is gravitating to the communities where talented people have chosen to live, because those communities offer a high *quality of place*.

Today, retaining and attracting talent requires not just quality schools and safe, affordable neighborhoods – it also means a full array of recreational, entertainment, and cultural options.

In particular, more and more people are seeking authenticity – local assets that are rooted in the *distinctiveness* of a place: its art, its architecture, its businesses and cultural offerings, its recreational amenities, its lifestyle. With that in mind, choosing not to embrace the arts as an important resource severely limits a community’s revitalization efforts.

Arts and Economic Impact:

Arts and cultural visitation translates into real money that’s routinely being infused into our local economy, generating both jobs and additional tax revenue for our community.

The F. M. Kirby Center for the Performing Arts helps to illustrate the impact of existing arts programming in Downtown Wilkes-Barre. During the 2014 fiscal year, more than 70,000 people attended shows at the F.M. Kirby Center. During that same season, the Kirby brought people into Downtown Wilkes-Barre for 107 different events. Those performances, on their own, translated into thousands of meals at local restaurants, hundreds of overnight stays at local hotels, and multiple ancillary purchases from local businesses.

We can get an even clearer portrait of the impact of the arts on the economic health of our city center by examining data from DCP’s 2014 Downtown Perception & Use Survey. That survey makes it clear that *people who patronize Downtown Wilkes-Barre’s existing arts venues also patronize downtown businesses at much higher levels than do other constituent groups.*

The table below compares the patronage of various downtown businesses and attractions by those survey respondents who report that they come downtown to visit exhibits or art galleries to downtown business patronage by all survey respondents:

	Downtown Art Gallery Visitors	All Survey Respondents	Difference
I “regularly” patronize downtown restaurants:	58%	38%	+20%
I “regularly” patronize Barnes & Noble:	36%	18%	+18%
I “regularly” shop in Downtown:	40%	22%	+18%
I “regularly” patronize Boscov’s:	47%	30%	+17%
I “regularly” attend F.M. Kirby Center shows:	25%	8%	+17%
I “regularly” patronize downtown’s independent retailers:	23%	9%	+14%
I “regularly” patronize Movies 14:	33%	24%	+9%

In other words, when we support the arts, we not only enhance our quality of life, but we also invest in Downtown Wilkes-Barre’s economic wellbeing – because consumers of Downtown’s arts offerings are spending more of their time and more of their discretionary income in our city center. Directly and indirectly, the arts are good for business.

Arts and our Local Quality of Life:

It’s also important to note the direct link between the arts, educational attainment, and a community’s future. That’s critical because, if we are not doing our utmost to educate our children and citizens, we are hurting their ability to compete in a global economy that’s fueled by the production of new ideas.

Education doesn’t just occur in a classroom – what’s just as important are those opportunities to independently nurture minds in galleries, art shows, and performance halls.

Enhancing the ability of local arts groups to make cultural experiences more broadly available to all citizens of Luzerne County –and thereby enhancing their exposure to arts and culture – is one of the best investments we can make for a more competitive community.

Fostering the Emergence of an Arts District in Downtown Wilkes-Barre:

Here’s the good news: according to DCP’s 2014 survey, much of the public already identifies Downtown Wilkes-Barre as an arts-and-culture destination: 69% of all respondents to the 2014 Survey either strongly agreed or agreed with the statement “Downtown is a good place to visit for entertainment, arts, and culture.”

That opinion is the result of a long series of prior investments in Downtown arts venues and programming, ranging from the F.M. Kirby Center to the Third Friday Art Walk.

However, recently, something very interesting has occurred: several different arts venues, including the Wyoming Valley Art League’s Circle Centre for the Arts; Marquis Art & Frame’s Second Floor Gallery; and now Wilkes University’s Sordoni Art Gallery, have either located in the second block of South Main Street or have announced plans to do so within the next year.

This clustering of small visual arts venues represents the organic emergence of the second block of South Main Street as the beginnings of a downtown “arts district.”

That’s wonderful news, but it presents a challenge: *how do we build on this momentum and continue to reinforce Downtown Wilkes-Barre’s position as the region’s cultural center?*

At the same time, downtown advocates are contemplating another question. We’ve done a terrific job, over many years, at creating a robust calendar of Downtown arts events, ranging from the six-decades old Fine Arts Fiesta to the newer Third Friday Art Walk, as well as individual performances and exhibits. That full event schedule leads, however, to the following query: *instead of creating more new events to bring people to our city center, shouldn’t our goal now be to convince event visitors to extend the duration and frequency of their visits to Downtown?*

Part of the answer to both questions is to focus on fostering the growth of a well-defined Downtown “arts district” to round out these investments, fostering a critical mass of arts activities that are not quite so scattered, and creating a new downtown destination – a clearly recognized zone that can grow into something greater than the sum of its parts.

What do we mean when we talk about an “arts district?” The national organization Americans for the Arts defines it as “a well-recognized, labeled, mixed-use area of a settlement in which a high concentration of cultural facilities serves as the anchor of attraction.”¹

We are beginning to see such a concentration of cultural facilities emerge in the heart of downtown – particularly along South Main Street from the F.M. Kirby Center to the second block. However, we are not there yet. We must 1) focus on more effective placemaking to connect our existing venues, 2) create new venues in targeted locations that fill continuing gaps in arts programming, and 3) ensure that existing and emerging cultural programs continue to find a home in Downtown.

For example, Downtown must be the focus of any future efforts to address one of the community’s most glaring absences: the absence of proper museum and cultural exhibition space appropriate to Greater Wilkes-Barre’s needs.

Whether in the visual arts, local history, or natural science, Greater Wilkes-Barre already possesses enviable cultural assets in the form of collections owned by a range of downtown institutions. However, without proper physical exhibition space, we cannot effectively share those collections with our citizens or maximize their use as educational tools to benefit our community. For example, the Luzerne County Historical Society continues to struggle to identify a solution for its 1894 museum building, which is both functionally inadequate and hidden from public view. Unsurprisingly, American Association of Museums data shows that Wilkes-Barre’s facilities fall far below the norm when compared with the median annual attendance for different types of museums across the nation.

This void has not gone unnoticed; one of the seven major recommendations of the 2007 Luzerne County Cultural Plan was the development of a shared exhibition facility to be located in Downtown Wilkes-Barre, where it would be both visible and accessible to every citizen of the Greater Wilkes-Barre area.² While some strides have been made in addressing this issue through the WVVA’s Circle Centre for the Arts and the recent Sordoni announcement, we aren’t really there yet.

¹ Hargrove, Cheryl: *Cultural Tourism: Attracting Visitors and Their Spending* (Americans for the Arts, 2014). P. 3

² Joint Urban Studies Center: *Luzerne County Cultural Plan* (2007), p. 38

Further, the closure of the Arts Seen Gallery was a step backwards. We need to continue to work to replace Arts Seen with a new storefront cooperative gallery, preferably on the second block of South Main Street, which can provide a venue for local artists to display their work for sale.

Another component found in so many arts districts around the country but completely absent from Downtown Wilkes-Barre is artists' live-work housing. This, of course, is how so many "arts neighborhoods" start – as places where working artists find affordable residential and studio space. As Downtown's residential sector begins to come into its own, perhaps it's time for us to again contemplate whether such a project would be something worth pursuing here.

Just as important as what we choose to build, however, is where we choose to build it. We must build from strength, reinforcing the cluster of arts venues that already exist in Downtown, instead of scattering them around and diffusing their impact – and connecting everything through a focus on effective place-making in the heart of our downtown.

Our experience with the Third Friday Art Walk shows that, when we're able to create a "critical mass" of arts activities in a given area – say, in Midtown Village, or in the node of galleries in South Main Street's second block – we get a cluster of people on the sidewalk who, in turn, attract other people. Too often, however, we have not been able to "connect the dots" - to convince visitors to a WVAL Third Friday show, for example, to leave the Circle Centre and venture down the street. Adding new arts venues and complimentary businesses to the existing array is one way to make that happen.

The physical aspects of placemaking are also very important. With a few exceptions, the historic commercial facades and storefronts of South Main Street's second block continue to be sadly neglected. This is a missed opportunity, because those facades provide the second block with an historic character that has been erased in other blocks of the commercial core. It's a character that, properly nurtured, could provide a real sense of place, just as similar investments have done in so many other communities.

Similarly, constructive activation of the pedestrian realm – through café tables, inviting storefronts, awnings, quality signage – serves as a visual invitation that attracts visitors, encourages them to walk down the street, and makes them feel comfortable doing so. To understand the potential, just look at what's happened in recent years with the new restaurants around the perimeter of Public Square.

Rehabilitating facades, investing in the quality of the streetscape, and improving other aspects of the second block's built environment are nothing less than crucial if we truly wish to shape that section of Downtown Wilkes-Barre into a place where people will want to spend their time and where complimentary businesses will choose to locate.

All of this can only help us to meet the other goals of our Downtown Action Plan. While the arts certainly anchor other neighborhoods that have become urban cultural destinations, those districts also include a mix of housing, restaurants and nightlife, and offices, becoming magnets for a range of people and investments. Similarly, fostering the emergence of the nascent "Arts District" in Downtown Wilkes-Barre will simultaneously help us to meet some of our other downtown goals, such as positioning Downtown as the region's "walk-to-everything" neighborhood of choice; its college neighborhood; its "innovation district;" and as a safe, clean, and attractive place to live, work, shop, and visit.

The measure of a place is taken, in part, by the artistic, cultural, and educational opportunities that are offered to its citizens. Our downtown arts and cultural amenities are visitor resources and critical development opportunities that must not be ignored; rather, they should be supported to the fullest extent possible and used to advance our larger downtown development goals. The arts – and the reinforcement of Downtown's role as a regional center of arts and culture - are critically important to the future of our city center as the vibrant heart of our community. Let's work together to realize that potential.