

Audubon Arts District: Urban redevelopment that worked

AFTER decades of attempts at urban alchemy by the city, private developers and Yale University, there is one piece of civic magic that all three helped materialize — the one block stretch of Audubon Street between Whitney Avenue and Orange Street known as the Audubon Arts District.

Mayor Richard C. Lee's attempt at an extreme makeover of the city in the 1950s and 1960s served to encourage the Neighborhood Music School, Creative Arts Workshop and the then new Arts Council of Greater New Haven and many other nonprof-



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its to create a fully integrated place for the arts where painting, sculpture, dance, theater, music and architecture dominate a corner of a little New England city.

Two abandoned buildings, Temple Mishkan Israel and the McLagon Foundry bookended the street — one vacant because of its congregation's move to suburbia, the other empty thanks to cheaper places to cast manhole covers.

The city was in full demolition mode and much of the land between them became vacant lots. Over three decades starting in the mid '60s, homes were built there or rehabbed for dozens of arts groups, including the arts council, NMS, New Haven Ballet, Connecticut Public Radio, ECA and retailers such as Foundry Music, Audubon Strings, Koffee? and a gaggle of artist studios, architecture offices and the Park of the Arts along the Farmington Canal. The district became a tightly woven tapestry of condensed and focused purpose.

Why did this combination of bricks and arts succeed while other attempts failed? As recounted by the tireless and inspiring Bitsie Clark, former longtime executive director of the arts council, the effort's early sustenance and subsequent triumphant coherence had two central pillars.



First there was a master plan devised by an architect, Charles Brewer. Its worth was not in its architectural vision — a huge parking garage and the demolition of the Lincoln Theater were bad ideas that never happened. But, it had principles that kept the eye on the prize as more than a dozen architecture firms worked with a gaggle of developers to reinvent a corner of New Haven.

The master plan was based on supporting existing, self-sustaining institutions — those that couldn't fit what the site and project offered (Artspace or the New Haven Symphony, for example) had to find other venues.

The plan was a model of

mixed-use development involving retail, housing, educational, institutional and business uses in direct contact with each other. This meant tax revenue would enable mostly full-throated city support that spanned a bevy of mayors. Mixed use also meant an income stream trickled down to the city-designated developer — the arts council — in the form of rents from leases for land it obtained from the city for \$1. Yale now owns the buildings that are across the street from NMS and pays annual rent of about \$100,000 to the arts council, invaluable seed money.

The plan's housing component meant an audience was always nearby for events, exhibits and



Melanie Stengel/Register photos

ABOVE: Renee Clements, who works at a law firm on Orange Street in New Haven, walks on Audubon Street. **LEFT:** The view of Audubon Street from Whitney Avenue toward Orange Street.

courses. Having studios for rent or sale meant creation could be close to performance or exhibit.

The only overtly architectural rule in the master plan was the integration of renovated existing buildings (foundry, synagogue and Lincoln Theater) with right-sized new buildings (NMS, CAW, McQueeney Towers public housing and The Community Foundation for Greater New Haven).

This model of integrating mixed use and new and rehabbed buildings acting in concert has worked in the nearby Ninth Square development — an approach that takes more time and ingenuity than a scorched-earth tear-down/build new approach that failed with the New Haven Coliseum and has generated criticism for Yale's proposal to build two new residential colleges.

The second reason the Audubon Arts District survived dozens of setbacks and uncertainties was a person. Not a heroic architect, firebrand community organizer, crusading politician or self-

aggrandizing patron. In a project that at one time or another had all of these personalities jump into the fray, it was a modest and dogged New Haven enthusiast, C. Newton "Newt" Schenck, a lawyer, who never stopped pushing, thinking and deal-making. "Newt's optimism and persistence paid off" remembers Clark.

Not surprisingly, financial backing ebbed and flowed, causing timely interventions by the Community Foundation for Greater New Haven, the city government, Yale and the now departed Connecticut Savings Bank. But, all that cash flowed from the validity of so many like-minded stakeholders — creative and performing artists and their patrons — who ultimately proved to have a bankable viability.

Not that the arts district's creation was a giddy romp of loving collaborators. A failed master plan competition, rancor over the use and upkeep of the common outdoor spaces, and the never-filled/often failed retail rental spaces are realities past

and present.

"Its one of the great blocks in New Haven or anywhere else," declares NMS Executive Director, Larry Zukof. "We wouldn't exist if it wasn't in this location," notes Jay Stevens of Foundry Music. After four decades, the Audubon Arts District is an entrenched reality validated by continued investment. NMS and ECA completely renovated their buildings in the last decade, and the Lincoln Theater is a work in progress.

"Support the arts!" is a cliché of good intentions. Buying tickets to a concert or a show, attending an art opening or a recital feels good. But laying your time and treasure on the line, like so many did for so long in the cause of the arts at the Audubon Arts District is walking the talk on a scale that has few equals anywhere.

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