ABSTRACT

Inner-city revitalization has become a crucial planning concern. Downtown neighborhoods are often suffering from urban decline, issues of homelessness and substance abuse, and lack of affordable housing. The Edge Gallery and Urban Art Centre in Winnipeg, MB, offers a unique approach to addressing these issues.

The Edge was developed in collaboration with a working group of Main Street’s five primary service providers for the homeless. Within The Edge Gallery itself are pottery studio memberships, space for event rentals, and eight affordable live/work spaces - the project, however, encompasses an entire block of buildings. In the second phase of the project, the New Occidental Hotel (a former single room occupancy hotel) was also purchased, and has now been transformed into the Red Road Lodge. The Red Road Lodge offers 50 affordable living spaces to individuals who are in recovery and may suffer with mental health issues.

The Edge is an innovative example of a deliberate effort to use culture-led regeneration to address issues of urban decline, homelessness, poverty, and affordable housing. Lessons learned from this case study will inform models of government cooperation and planning policy relating to culture-led regeneration strategies in Winnipeg and Canada.

“Arts and culture are an economic development tool; cultural and creative expression is a means to affecting deep and lasting social change.”

The Edge Gallery, edgevillage.com
BACKGROUND

Urban planning and the revitalization of our cities has become a vital area of research. As the urban population grows, issues of poverty, health, safety, and the dwindling supply of available resources are growing in urgency. Winnipeg’s inner-city suffers from an aging housing stock, low socioeconomic conditions, and high crime rates (Kuly, Stewart, and Dudley, 2005). The inner-city neighborhood of North Main Street and its surrounding areas have experienced considerable urban decline over the past several decades, with many commercial spaces closing and the area increasingly becoming characterized by issues of homelessness and substance abuse (Shultz and Walls, 2007). New, innovative strategies for creating community cohesion and well-being (as well as investing in physical infrastructure) are vital if we are to reverse the trend of decline that is presently occurring in our cities.

Increasingly, urban policy has looked to culture and the arts to be a driver for urban regeneration (Garcia, 2004, Evans and Shaw, 2006). Culture-led regeneration is defined as “the use of arts and culture as a means of bringing about the regeneration of declining urban areas” (McCarthy, 1998, p. 271). While many community arts organizations exist within Winnipeg, few have opened as part of a directed strategy to use culture-led regeneration to address issues of urban decline.

The Edge is located on the 600 block of Main Street, North of Portage Avenue, and sits on the Western boundary of the South Point Douglas Neighbourhood.

A South Point Douglas Pre-Consultation Study commissioned by the City of Winnipeg in April of 2008 held meetings to “determine the needs and views of the various stakeholders and to identify current issues in the neighbourhood” (Bridgman Collaborative and McKay Finnigan and Associates, 2008, p.1). The stakeholder groups consulted were area residents, artists, business owners, and aboriginal organizations. All four groups spoke of housing challenges in the area.

Artists cited concerns of gentrification and a “fear that the City will expropriate existing residents/artists” (p. 15). When asked what they wanted South Point Douglas to look like in ten years, artists responded that they would like to see housing as the predominant land use in the area, mixed-income housing, and the retention of older buildings (Bridgman Collaborative and McKay Finnigan and Associates, 2008, p.15). “Derelict buildings” and “slum landlords not maintaining numerous properties” were among the concerns cited by area residents (p. 18). Residents’ ten-year vision for the area included mixed-use development, mixed-income housing, and a “complete artists’ colony” (p. 19).

Image: A map of the South Point Douglas Area. The green line indicates the boundaries used for the purposes of the Pre-Consultation Study. The Edge (notated by the purple dot) falls just within the boundaries. 
Credit: www.winnipeg.ca/ppd/planning/Secondary_Plans/SouthPointDouglas/SPD_Pre_Consult.pdf
FACTS OF THE CASE

The Edge Artist Village is a relatively new initiative, and is one of many changes currently occurring in the North Main Street community. The Edge defines itself as “a community driven non-profit organization for the arts located in the centre of Winnipeg” (The Edge, About section, 2009).

The Edge was developed in collaboration with a working group consisting of Main Street’s five primary service providers for the homeless (the Salvation Army, the Siloam Mission, the Main Street Project, Neeginan, and the Red Road Lodge). Government funding for the Edge was announced in 2005, with significant support coming from the Government of Canada, the Province of Manitoba and the City of Winnipeg through the Winnipeg Housing and Homelessness Initiative (WHHI), and CentureVenture Development Corporation (Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation, 2005). Winnipeg Interior Designer Richard Walls purchased the building at 611 Main Street which now houses the Edge as well as Mentoring Artists for Women’s Art (MAWA). Walls owns and manages 611 Main Street, while the Edge is governed by a volunteer board (Schultz and Walls, 2007).

The Edge Gallery itself includes gallery space, pottery studio memberships, space for event rentals, community workshop facilities, and eight affordable live/work spaces for artists. The project, however, encompasses an entire block of buildings. Since the opening of The Edge Gallery, MAWA (Mentoring Artists for Women’s Art), The Tallest Poppy restaurant, and The Bike Dump have all either opened or relocated to The Edge’s block.

The vision of The Edge is broad, and encompasses both the well-being of artists and the community. It “exists to increase public interest in the arts and improve the economic status of artists to ensure that Winnipeg thrives as a centre for artistic and cultural excellence” (The Edge, Vision section, 2009). It is also rooted in the belief that “the arts connect people to their community”, and that “arts and culture are an economic development tool”. Finally, the Edge believes that the live/work spaces located in the gallery provide artists with “a 24-hr/day connection to the neighbourhood and add a degree of security and stability to the community” (The Edge, Vision section, 2009).

In a second phase of the project, Walls has also purchased the New Occidental Hotel, a former single room occupancy hotel (SRO) located adjacent to The Edge, and transformed it into the Red Road Lodge. The Red Road Lodge is intended to be an “Arts and Culture Community Resource, Education, and Wellness Centre”, with the 50 guest rooms in the building used for transitional housing for individuals who are in recovery and may suffer with mental health issues (Schultz and Walls, 2007). Walls notes that this approach is unique due to the use of an arts and cultural agenda as part of the healing process. (Walls, Winnipeg Free Press, 2007).
CONCLUSIONS AND OUTCOMES

Walls developed the Edge as an alternative for artists looking for affordable work and living space. While many artists live in the neighbouring Exchange District, rising costs and non-residential zoning have made it increasingly difficult to stay there. At the Edge, artists have a comfortable and affordable space to live and work. The rent for a small bachelor unit is $495 per month, while a two-bedroom loft suite costs $795 a month. The all-inclusive rent is fixed for the next ten years, as part of the agreement with the federal-provincial Affordable Housing Initiative. All units are currently occupied, and there is a waiting list of interested tenants.

The goal of the project is not only to revitalize the North Main Street community, but to create an arts community that is open and accessible to the public. Walls hopes The Edge Artist Village will contribute to making the process of art visible, and notes that is part of the appeal of many successful arts-based urban areas; he cites Vancouver’s Granville Island as an example of this (CBC, 2006).

Since funding for The Edge was announced in 2005, several other businesses, organizations, and individuals have invested in the north Main Street strip, on many different scales. In March of 2008, The Winnipeg Regional Health authority announced it would be relocating to the neighbourhood, constructing an 80,000-square-foot building at the corner of Main Street and Logan Avenue. Other large-scale projects include the re-development of the former Union Bank Tower on the corner of Main Street and William Avenue as the future home of Red River College’s culinary arts program.

“The idea was to try to create a focal point to Main Street to change the identity using arts and culture as the medium”

(Walls, CBC Interview, 2006)
LESSON LEARNED

While the Exchange District has long been considered a hub for Winnipeg’s creative population, the location of The Edge project has brought the issue of gentrification to the forefront. High-end condominium projects and other development in the Exchange District are making it increasingly difficult for artists to live and work there.

The fact that The Edge and the Red Road Lodge have made providing affordable housing a priority is a major step towards preventing similar gentrification in the north Main Street community.

The Canada-Manitoba Affordable Housing Initiative (AHI) was created in September 2002, with the goal of increasing affordable rental units and new housing in Manitoba. The Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation and the Province share the costs of the program. The City of Winnipeg has also included the provision of affordable housing in specific inner-city neighbourhoods in its Housing Policy (CMHC Funding Announcement, 2005). Despite these efforts, funding for projects such as The Edge and the Red Road Lodge remain an ongoing challenge.

Lessons learned from this case-in-point include the importance of cooperation between government and community ventures. Additionally, The Edge is a reminder that innovative solutions to the shortage of affordable housing in downtown Winnipeg are possible with the right support. Finally, The Edge is a successful example of a cutting-edge approach to urban revitalization: through the use of arts and culture.

“The Edge-Artist Village is another fine example of an innovative partnership between all levels of government and the private sector to provide Canadians with safe, quality, and affordable housing...This project also demonstrates our commitment to facilitate community projects that help stimulate the revitalization of downtown Winnipeg and integrate housing into a cultural environment.”

(Anita Neville, CMHC Funding Announcement, 2005).
REFERENCES


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