

A CLOSER LOOK

A Closer Look takes topics from previous and current issues of *Bridges* and examines them from a local perspective.


 ...AT THE LOUISVILLE REGION

The Lowdown on Lower Town

Growing Number of Artists Call Paducah Neighborhood Home

Is there a SoHo in the South?

Ask Paducah, Ky., residents and they will tell you that the artists' haven in lower Manhattan has nothing on Paducah's Lower Town. There, visitors can find contemporary art, antiques, fine jewelry, innovative cuisine, gifts for the home, coffeehouses, historic architecture and artists from around the country.

More than 60 artists have relocated to Paducah to live and work in Lower Town. They come from places such as Hawaii, Illinois, Kentucky, Maryland, New York, North Carolina, San Francisco and Washington, D.C. In five years, a once-blighted neighborhood in downtown Paducah has become a thriving arts district.

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In 1999, after living in Lower Town for 10 years, Mark Barone, a painter and printmaker, had had enough of the influx of crime and drugs that was taking over the neighborhood. Barone said he knew the neighborhood had to change—or he was going to have to leave. He decided not to leave, but rather to do something about it.

With 70 percent of the properties in the community being rentals, some rented on a daily or weekly basis, his first plan of attack was to get absentee landlords to bring their buildings up to code. Barone proposed a rental licensing ordinance to city officials that required landlords

to purchase a business license. It also required regular property inspections. Because vital neighborhoods were one of the city's primary goals, the officials were receptive to Barone's proposal, and within nine months the ordinance became law.

Still, the neighborhood needed more. Barone's second plan of attack was to recruit other artists to Lower Town. From this idea came the birth of Paducah's Artist Relocation Program.

The concept of convincing artists to relocate to Lower Town has been a community and economic development success story. The idea was to attract artists to the neighborhood to rehab some of the

homes to their previous Victorian, Italianate, Greek Revival and Queen Anne grand style. There was also an economic development part to the equation. The Artist Relocation Program was not looking for just any artists, but ones who would bring entrepreneurial, intellectual and artistic skills to the community.

Barone knew the idea of creating an arts district was not unique. Paducah would have to come up with something different from other such communities throughout the country. That something was a unique incentive package that turned out to be critical to the success of the program, he says. (See sidebar.)

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Max Beckmann's
TOP 5
Cultural
Destinations

1. Paris
2. Paducah
3. New York
4. Chicago
5. Frau Blüecher's Artist Retreat, Munich

Yeah, Paris is OK,
but their BBQ's awful.
Opportunities for Artists,
Galleries, & Restaurants.

PADUCAH
ARTIST RELOCATION PROGRAM

270-444-8690

This advertisement is one of several ads placed in nationally distributed artists' magazines to attract artists to Paducah.

Lowdown

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Wally Bateman, president of Paducah Bank, and Joe Framptom, chairman and CEO of the bank, admit they had their doubts about the program. However, with Lower Town right next door to the bank and the neighborhood so deeply troubled, they say they knew it was the “right thing to do.” Once the bank committed its support to the program, the incentive package and a marketing plan were developed, and the city began recruiting artists.

Now the question was whether the artists would come. They did, and they are still coming from all across the country. Today, the question is why artists are willing to move from urban areas such as



Artist Mark Palmer turned an old, dilapidated building (above) into an attractive gallery (below) when he relocated to Paducah from Washington, D.C.

Washington, D.C., New York and San Francisco to Paducah, with a population of about 26,000 people? The artists say there are two reasons: ownership and a sense of community.

Many say they experienced situations in other cities where they moved into a blighted community and helped revitalize a neighborhood, only to be forced out when rents became too expensive. In Paducah, ownership is the key component to the incentive package. They buy the property.

Larry Rudolph, senior vice president of Paducah Bank, picks up on the importance the artists also place on community.

“The artists come to really be a part of the community and make a difference,” Rudolph says.

Framptom agrees. “The artists have become our friends,” he says. “We know them by their first names. We see them at church and restaurants. They are a vital fabric in our community.”

Craig Kittner, an artist from Washington, D.C., arrived in Paducah on a Sunday afternoon in February 2002 after reading about the Artist Relocation Program. The majority of the shops were closed that day, and it seemed very sleepy and quiet. “But it felt right,” he says. Kittner and his wife, Denise, are now the owners of Café Minou in Lower Town.

Patt Blue, an artist from New York who had lived in Paducah until the age of 12, says, “I moved back to Paducah to be a part of the program because I wanted a home, a community, a less stressful life, a dog and a back yard.”

The revitalization of Lower Town has had an economic impact throughout Paducah. A domino effect has spilled over into several areas: construction, restaurants, hotels, retail,

Incentives Paducah Uses to Attract Artists to Town

- 100 percent financing for the purchase and rehab of an existing structure or for a new structure in Lower Town
- free lots for new construction, as available
- up to \$2,500 for architectural or other professional fees
- tax exemptions for all materials for rehab or new construction
- a free web page for the artist
- national marketing to promote the city and Lower Town
- mixed-used zoning to enable gallery, studio and living space under one roof

entertainment venues, tourism and an increased tax base. The city also has made a variety of infrastructure improvements. New streetlights have been installed, sidewalks and curbs have been improved, and 4-way stop signs have been added to many intersections.

Paducah’s Museum of the American Quilter’s Society and its annual quilt show attract more than 100,000 visitors from around the world each year. The Lower Town artists have been able to capitalize on the many visitors to the museum, and the quilters have showcased some of their work in the art galleries.

Five years ago, none of the partners would have imagined the success of the Artist Relocation Program. To date, the artists have opened more

than two dozen galleries, with more scheduled to open in the near future.

For other communities interested in replicating the program, Barone has some advice. “Paducah’s deal was about community. It was about doing something good in an area where nothing had been done for 75 years. It was about doing the right thing. That is the secret.”

For more information about the Artist Relocation Program, visit www.paducaharts.com/about.php.

This issue of A Closer Look is a follow-up to “Weaving the Arts into Communities,” the cover story in the Autumn 2003 issue of Bridges.



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