

**LEVERAGING PUBLIC
INVESTMENT IN THE ARTS**

The Role of Arts-based Economic
Development Strategies in
Georgia Communities

ATHENS



Photo courtesy of Jamie deRevere



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Athens: A City Committed to Art

The “Nest” is a vibrant sculpture of red-metal bars and stainless steel mesh, dramatically suspended inside the new atrium of the Athens Classic Center, a convention center and performing arts arena. And it’s one of the first pieces of public art in Athens paid for with taxpayer money.

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– Doc Eldridge, President and CEO,
Athens Area Chamber of Commerce

“There is a deliberate dedication to the arts in Athens,” says Mayor Nancy Denson. “The attitude isn’t ‘if it happens, it happens.’ There’s a conscious effort by the government to make it work.”

In 2010, the Athens-Clarke County Commission strengthened that commitment by passing an ordinance requiring that 1 percent of the construction budget for all special purpose local option sales tax (SPLOST) projects be dedicated to public art connected to the project.



So when the Classic Center underwent a \$24 million expansion in 2012 that added exhibit space and increased seating capacity, some of the budget helped fund the “Nest.”

The public art initiative is just one element contributing to Athens’ vibrant arts scene. The Classic Center is home to concerts and performing arts. Lyndon House Arts Center offers classes for all ages and provides a venue for artists to showcase their work. The Georgia Museum of Art, housed on the University of Georgia campus, showcases art from around the world, while the university itself offers concerts, plays and other performing arts events.

Denson and city officials also view the arts as a magnet to attract new business to Athens. She points to the 2012 decision by Caterpillar, a top manufacturer of tractors and industrial equipment, to build a facility in Athens, noting that the city’s artistic attributes contribute to a higher quality of life.

“Arts are not the deciding factor,” Denson says, “but companies look at the total environment. Sometimes it comes down to the one small thing that pushes one community over another. In Athens, we’re hoping it’s the arts.”

City leaders are not alone in their commitment to the arts. The business community is behind the efforts as well.

“You don’t have to be involved in the arts to appreciate what it does for the community and economic development,” says Doc Eldridge, head of the Athens-Clarke County Chamber of Commerce and former mayor of Athens. “The business community is supportive of the arts, and vice versa. Both sides know that the Arts are so critically important to the growth and uniqueness of the community. It’s why people like to come back to Athens.”

Using The Arts To Re-Invent Downtown

The story of how Athens came to embrace the arts so firmly begins in the early 1980s. The city's downtown hit a slump just after Georgia Square Mall opened in 1981 and flagship stores like Macy's, J.C. Penney and Belk left for the mall. Almost overnight, downtown went from being what Mayor Nancy Denson calls "the retail center" to one that was "dead" after 6 p.m.

But there was hope: The empty buildings and inexpensive rents proved conducive to attracting clubs and bars for live music, and soon the Athens music scene was born.

"Athens transformed from a 'Mayberry-like' city to a funky little downtown, completely re-inventing itself," Denson says. "This gave Athens a more creative vibe and laid the groundwork for the arts in general."

Indeed, the citizenry increasingly embraced a creative identity over the years. In the mid-1990s, voters approved SPLOST funding to build the Classic Center and expand the Lyndon House Arts Center. Other SPLOST referendums were later approved to expand the Classic Center and renovate the Morton Theatre, a historic performing arts space that was once an African-American vaudeville theatre.

"Art has probably received more money from SPLOST than any other single area," says Eldridge, "In Athens, we know [infrastructure] can't all be about roads and bridges."

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The Classic Center is a centerpiece, doubling as a convention center and a premier performing arts venue. It hosts travelling Broadway shows, concerts, dance performances and a range of other events that draw patrons from outside of Athens. Beyond bringing the community together, the Center has a profound impact on the economy: \$65 million a year, according to a 2013 study.

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- Marilyn Wolf-Ragatz, Chair,
Athens Cultural Arts Commission

Another jewel in Athens' arts crown is the Lyndon House Arts Center, a building once home to a prominent Athens family. The city acquired the house in 1939 and used it primarily as a recreation hall. It became a visual arts center in 1974 and expanded 25 years later, though the original historic Ware-Lyndon House is still attached and serves as a house museum.

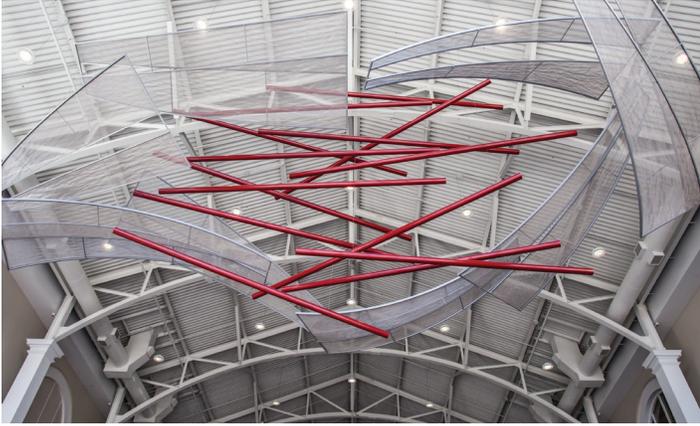
The Center hosts gallery exhibitions, festivals, workshops, art meetings, special events and classes for all ages and levels. It is also home to 22 art guilds.

"The vision is for Lyndon House to be a true community arts center," says Didi Dunphy, the executive director. "We want to provide a creative and productive environment for those who want to pursue the arts." She says what makes the Lyndon House successful is the fact that the community has embraced the arts as an element for an enriching life in Athens.

The city also financially supports the Center - since it is a division of Athens-Clarke County Leisure Services - which Dunphy calls "a partnership that works."

Dunphy is working on strengthening the membership program to help pay for special projects, such as juried





shows. She also wants to widen the scope of Lyndon House, hosting artists in residence and adding new kinds of programs. “My mission is to incorporate art into everyday life,” Dunphy says, “whether that’s functionally or aesthetically. It’s a form of cultural placemaking.”

‘Art For Everyone’

Another cultural component in Athens is the Georgia Museum of Art. The museum not only displays works from artists from all over the world, it also provides education to school-age children, film series and symposia for artists.

“Our motto is ‘art for everyone,’ and we are always trying to find new ways to accommodate different interests,” says Michael Lachowski, who is head of public relations at the museum.

The symposia hosted by the museum throughout the year bring artists from all over the country into Athens for several days. “These can draw up to 200 people at a time, which can have an impact on the economy, since they pay to stay, eat and shop,” Lachowski says. “It also gives us a chance to show visitors a part of the University that is not athletics.”

To engage audiences, the Georgia Museum offers “Family Days” to give parents and children a chance to view an exhibition and participate in an art project related to that exhibit, all free of charge. The Georgia Museum of Art (GMOA) also takes part in monthly “Third Thursdays,” in which seven art spaces—GMOA, ATHICA, Cine, the Classic Center, Hotel Indigo, the Lamar Dodd School of Art and Lyndon House— have extended hours for an “evening of art.” The Classic Center Cultural Foundation sponsors a shuttle to provide free transportation to the different venues.

The arts scene extends way beyond visual arts – from film, dance, theatre, music, even learning the art of aerial dancing - proving there is something for everyone in Athens. “The arts scene in Athens is lively and we have a lot of it,” says Mayor Denson. “I am proud we are always doing something to promote the arts.”

The Art of Public Art

The public is now also engaged in public art, thanks to the creation of the Athens Cultural Arts Commission, established at the end of 2010 to help oversee the public art installation process of projects funded by SPLOST money. According to Marilyn Wolf-Ragatz, chair of the commission, the group helps keep the process “organized and consistent.”

“People often think it’s a group whose purpose is to select and install art,” says Wolf-Ragatz. “That’s not it at all.”

Instead, the process is much more involved, including getting input from the stakeholders, coming up with the criteria for the project, gathering proposals and pulling together a selection committee to choose the artist. At the end of the project, the Commission organizes an event to unveil the installation that has something for all ages.

Wolf-Ragatz says that for the most part, the community supports their efforts. But they did run into trouble when a SPLOST project involved the county jail. “That was our first big project,” says Wolf-Ragatz. “One percent of that construction budget was large, and many residents reacted against placing art in jail. Some worried it might be placed in jail cells, which wasn’t the case.” Since the Athens-Clarke County Commission must approve all public arts projects, public opinion was enough to make the measure fail. No public art was done at the jail, and the money went back into the main project budget.

That project notwithstanding, the city and the community know the importance of public art. “We know that quality public art draws more businesses, young people and artists into a community” says Wolf-Ragatz. “It makes Athens a more welcoming place. It also introduces citizens to new and exciting forms of arts.”